

Pages 1–6

(Note: using internal pagination from the doc; corresponds to first ~6 pages of content up to the “**Big Data as an analytical object**” section)

Summary

- The essay opens by comparing two seemingly unrelated thinkers: **Bronislaw Malinowski** (anthropologist, father of fieldwork) and **Christian Rudder** (data scientist, co-founder of OKCupid).
 - Both reject **surveys and questionnaires** in favor of observing **actual behavior**—Malinowski through immersive fieldwork, Rudder via **digital trace data**.
 - This sets up the central claim: **Big Data and ethnography are not so separate**—both attempt to capture lived experience, though via very different epistemologies.
 - The author argues for an “**anthropology of data**”, exploring how **sociality is extracted and rendered into computational systems** like AI.
 - Big Data is framed as **the engine of two main computational transformations**:
 - Social platforms (e.g., Facebook, Uber)
 - AI systems based on **machine learning**, which now “**learn**” from data instead of following hard-coded rules.
 - The text critiques techno-utopian hype (e.g., Chris Anderson’s “end of theory” claim) and positions Big Data as an object of **epistemological critique and political concern**.
 - Critical scholars (e.g., boyd & Crawford, Boellstorff) challenge Big Data’s **claims to objectivity and unmediated truth**, arguing instead that data is **always interpretive, cultural, and power-laden**.
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Course Theme Analysis

Theme

Analysis

Reality vs Fantasy	Big Data promises total visibility —a fantasy of knowing the social in real time, bypassing theory or interpretation. But this fantasy obscures how power and ideology shape data’s meaning .
Image / Interface	Data itself is treated like an image—a snapshot of human behavior —but it’s framed through platforms and algorithms that determine what gets recorded and how it’s used.
Space & Time	Interfaces extract social action in fragments and timestamps , transforming embodied, contextual activity into decontextualized, real-time metrics . A user becomes an event log .

Critical Questions + Reflective Answers

Q1. Why is the comparison between Malinowski and Rudder important to the text’s larger argument?

Answer:

Because it challenges the **binary between qualitative (anthropology) and quantitative (data science)** knowledge. Both thinkers sought **unmediated access to human behavior**—Malinowski through participant observation; Rudder through server logs. This sets up the possibility of thinking **ethnographically about data itself**, and not simply seeing data science as its opposite.

Q2. What does it mean to say Big Data is not “raw” but interpretive?

Answer:

Big Data is often presented as **transparent and self-evident**, but in reality it is **filtered, structured, and selected** by engineers, designers, and institutions. Like any ethnographic account, data is **mediated by human choices**, which makes it an object not of **truth**, but of **interpretation and critique**.

Q3. How does this section situate AI systems within the politics of data?

Answer:

AI today is built not on **explicit human rules**, but on **patterns derived from massive datasets**. These datasets reflect **social norms, habits, and biases**, meaning that AI is not

neutral—it encodes **cultural values**. The more data it ingests, the more it becomes a **mirror of social power and history**, rather than an escape from it.

Q4. How are terms like “machine learning” and “deep learning” re-politicized in this analysis?

Answer:

Instead of seeing machine learning as a **purely technical advance**, the text reframes it as a **mode of cultural extraction**—a way of learning from and **modulating human behavior**. These systems “learn” not abstractly, but from **us**, from **our digital gestures**, and thus they **inherit our politics**.

Q5. How does this reading connect to earlier texts like *Schüll on gambling interfaces* or *McCarthy’s misuse of the TV set*?

Answer:

Like Schüll’s slot machines or McCarthy’s TVs, Big Data platforms are **interfaces that collect and shape desire**. They promise empowerment or insight, but in practice **extract value from unconscious behaviors**. The interface is both **sensor and manipulator**—capturing the user and guiding them simultaneously.

Final Suggestions for Expansion

You’re in a fantastic place to write a comparative reflection or essay. Here’s a sample thesis you could use to launch a longer piece:

Thesis Idea:

While Enlightenment thinkers used calculation to master the world through certainty, modern Big Data systems continue this legacy in a mutated form—offering not truth, but prediction. Across Daston, Prince, and Data Anthropology, the interface emerges as the site where **fantasy, optimization, and partial visibility collide**—transforming the subject from a knower into a behavioral trace within a feedback loop.

Pages 6–12: Summary, Course Themes, and Deep Questions

Detailed Summary

- The text now unpacks how data is extracted **not just from transactions**, but from **everyday sociality**—our likes, chats, clicks, scrolls, relationships.
 - It focuses on the case of **Cambridge Analytica**, revealing how personal data was used to create **psychographic profiles** and manipulate political behavior.
 - Platforms claim to “connect people,” but what they actually do is **harvest social interaction** and repackage it as **predictive behavioral data** for advertisers and political actors.
 - This is framed as a form of “**surplus value of sociality**”: value that platforms extract **just from people being themselves online**.
 - The author draws on **Shoshana Zuboff’s “surveillance capitalism”** to show how users are turned into **data laborers** without consent or awareness.
 - **Self-tracking apps** (e.g. fitness, menstruation, mood trackers) are discussed as interfaces that **blur the line between care and control**—users willingly submit intimate information, which is often commodified.
 - The screen becomes a space of **self-performance, extraction, and feedback**, where **interiority becomes data**, and data becomes **the new ground of subjectivity**.
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Course Theme Analysis

Theme	Reflection
Reality vs. Fantasy	The fantasy is empowerment through personalization; the reality is behavioral prediction, subtle manipulation, and value extraction .
Image / Interface Function	Interfaces here are soft extractors —they are pleasurable and responsive, but serve economic and political interests behind the scenes. They modulate desire while capturing it.

Space & Time Apps and platforms reconfigure **temporal rhythms**: they create habits (checking, logging, swiping), induce compulsive feedback loops, and transform **bodily space into measurable micro-events** (e.g. heartbeats, cycles, clicks).

Critical Questions + Full-Length Answers

Q1. What does the “surplus value of sociality” mean, and why is it important?

Answer:

It refers to the **economic value generated by everyday, unintentional social behavior**—liking a post, replying to a DM, even pausing during a scroll. These micro-gestures, once ephemeral, are now **captured and monetized**. This concept flips traditional ideas of labor: users are not *working* in the conventional sense, but their **social being is put to work**. This reframes the interface as a space of **invisible labor**, where the act of **being social becomes productive for platforms**.

Q2. How does the Cambridge Analytica case exemplify the politics of datafication?

Answer:

It reveals how data is not just collected, but used to **shape behavior and belief**. Users thought they were just taking personality quizzes; in reality, their psychological profiles were used to **target political messaging** designed to sway opinions. This case illustrates the **dark side of personalization**—where data becomes a **tool of micro-manipulation**, transforming the interface into a **political actor**.

Q3. How do self-tracking apps blur the line between care and control?

Answer:

These apps present themselves as **tools of empowerment**—allowing users to understand and improve their health, mood, productivity. But they also collect, analyze, and sometimes sell intimate data. The user becomes both **subject and object** of surveillance. This duality—**self-care as data capture**—shows how the interface becomes a **disciplinary mechanism**, wrapped in the aesthetics of personal improvement.

Q4. What kind of subject is produced through data-based interfaces?

Answer:

Not a coherent, autonomous self, but a **dividual**—a fragmented being made up of data points, behavioral predictions, and algorithmic categorizations. This subject is **tracked, nudged, and optimized**. Rather than expressing identity, the user becomes a **feedback node in a data economy**—looping between performance and capture.

Q5. How is this discussion connected to earlier readings like Schüll's gambling zone or Prince's "stain"?

Answer:

Like Schüll's gambler, today's datafied subject is caught in **rhythmic loops of interaction**, believing in agency while being subtly controlled. And like Prince's "stain," the subject appears in the interface only as a **trace**, a profile, a behavioral pattern—**not as a full self, but as a readable artifact**. In both cases, the interface hides **systems of modulation and erasure** behind **design, convenience, and pleasure**.

COMMENT 1:

We see the link between a system where everybody's data is linked to themselves and is the proof of their fantasy needs. Similar to gambling machines we see the data extraction instead of the monetary extraction in case of gambling machines.

Evaluation:

Excellent comparison. You're picking up on the shift from **financial value extraction** (as in gambling) to **affective and behavioral value extraction** (as in platform economies).

In Schüll, gamblers are caught in **closed loops of interface feedback**, believing they're in control, while their behavior is being shaped and mined. In data systems, users are similarly caught—scrolling, liking, swiping—**not realizing their "being online" is labor**, producing data for commodification.

Suggested Refinement:

Just as Schüll's gamblers feed machines designed for monetary extraction, platform users feed systems designed for data extraction. In both cases, the subject is not a

consumer but a producer of value—engaged in a loop that feels autonomous but is structured for capture.

COMMENT 2:

We also see the misuse of the data as data is often used to sell us the commodified fantasies that are often not necessary.

Evaluation:

Strong idea. You're pointing out that data is used **not just to reflect us back to ourselves**, but to **reshape our desire**, often pushing us toward **commodified identities** or **false needs**.

This links beautifully to **Zuboff's surveillance capitalism**: platforms are not neutral—they **engineer desire**, often preemptively.

It also ties into **Mulvey's idea of fetishistic scopophilia** and Prince's "stain": the image you're given back of yourself is **curated, frozen, and commercialized**.

Suggested Enhancement:

Data is used not just to sell us what we want, but to fabricate desire itself. These commodified fantasies are optimized for engagement, not fulfillment. The interface becomes a mirror that doesn't reflect, but reshapes—seducing the user with algorithmic intimacy while quietly redirecting attention and action.

COMMENT 3:

And it also helps the politicians make the decisions.

Evaluation:

This ties directly into the **Cambridge Analytica case** discussed in the reading—and your instinct is right. But this could be expanded into a larger point: the **political consequences of interface-driven visibility**.

The key issue isn't just "helping politicians"—it's about **predictive manipulation**, **microtargeting**, and the use of intimate data to **shape public opinion in non-transparent ways**.

Suggested Reframe:

The use of psychographic data to microtarget voters, as seen in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, reveals how interfaces have become tools of political influence. What appears as harmless interaction—quizzes, likes, follows—becomes a map of emotional vulnerability, used to manipulate perception and choice. The interface becomes a subtle instrument of governance.

COMMENT 4:

Here, a issue is raised about the privacy. Self-tracking apps provide the interface that gives us confidence that we are in control but we see the same product being recommended to us when we were talking to our friends about it when the mobile was close.

Evaluation:

YES. This is a very *relatable* and *experiential* point—beautifully tying into the course's theme of **fantasy vs. control**. You're speaking to the **illusion of autonomy**: interfaces *feel* like personal tools, but they are **surveillance infrastructures**.

What's even better is that you're grounding theory in **lived experience** (the eerie moment of seeing an ad for something you casually mentioned). That's the exact kind of concrete example that bridges **abstract theory** and **cultural life**.

This also ties to **McCarthy** and **TV as an ambient field of capture**—where the user thinks they're choosing content, but are really being modulated.

Suggested Enhancement:

Self-tracking interfaces simulate empowerment—they invite users to monitor themselves, giving a sense of self-mastery. But the data is not held in isolation. It circulates, monetizes, and returns in unexpected ways—like a recommended product appearing after a private conversation. The screen listens, not to serve, but to mine. This reflects a deeper anxiety: that control is always partial, and the interface always listens beyond our consent.

Additional Cross-Textual Comparisons You Could Add:

Other Text

Comparative Insight

- Prince** The subject becomes a **surface for algorithmic parsing**, just like the **selfie subject is a response to the gaze**. The user is not “seen,” they are **predicted**.
- Daston** Just like Enlightenment tables offered the **illusion of calculable mastery**, platforms offer **dashboards and metrics** that promise self-knowledge but deliver **behavioral conditioning**.
- Interkom** Interkom emphasized **proximity-based, relational signaling**. These data systems erase **context and locality**—you’re seen **not as a person**, but as a **statistical node in a behavioral cluster**.

Pages 12–End: Summary, Themes & Critical Questions

Detailed Summary

- The text turns to the **possibility of reclaiming data** through an **anthropological lens**—one that foregrounds **context, relationality, and opacity**, rather than transparency, legibility, or prediction.
- The author references **auditing projects and data activism**, which try to **make data systems visible and accountable**, but cautions that **surveillance logics are resilient**—they adapt and mask themselves.
- Instead of merely revealing how data is used, anthropology might explore how data is **felt, negotiated, and resisted** in everyday life.

- The text suggests we shift from treating data as **resource** to seeing it as **relation**—a way people **signal, withdraw, perform, or hide**.
- There's an emphasis on “**vernacular data practices**”—how people use fake names, create multiple profiles, post symbolic content, or game the system. These are forms of **opacity and play**.
- The author engages with thinkers like **Glissant** (opacity), **Moten**, and **Harney**—arguing for **non-extractive, non-legible forms of sociality** that interface design often tries to erase.
- The closing argument is not to romanticize opacity, but to see it as a **political and ethical tactic** in an era of platform capitalism.

Course Theme Integration (Final Batch)

Theme	Reflection
Fantasy vs. Reality	Platforms sell the fantasy of data-driven clarity; this section insists on the real value of ambiguity, refusal, and untranslatability .
Image / Interface	Interfaces try to render users readable, predictable, and profitable . But people use interfaces to misperform, resist, or disappear , creating social zones beyond visibility .
Time & Space	Users construct fragmented, nonlinear identities across platforms —multiple names, looping behaviors, silent withdrawals. These are temporal interventions against real-time extraction .

Critical Questions + Extended Answers

Q1. What does it mean to treat data as a “relation” rather than a resource?

Answer:

To treat data as relation means recognizing that it's not just **collected from people**, but **made through interaction**. Data is a result of **social, cultural, and affective decisions**—what we share, how we represent ourselves, when we withdraw. Seeing it this way centers **the agency**

of the user, even when under surveillance. It transforms the interface from a site of passive extraction into one of **contested, negotiated expression**.

Q2. How does opacity function politically in this framework?

Answer:

Opacity—refusing to be fully known or captured—is framed as a **strategy of resistance**. Platforms want users to be **legible and predictable**, but opacity introduces **uncertainty, refusal, play**. Through anonymity, cryptic communication, or deliberate misrepresentation, users reclaim control over **how and whether they are read**. This echoes *Prince's stain* and *Barker's on-air personas*—acts of **symbolic distance** from the gaze of power.

Q3. Why does the author emphasize vernacular data practices, and what are some examples?

Answer:

Because resistance doesn't always look like protest—it often looks like **everyday workaround and improvisation**. Examples include:

- Fake birthdays or names on social media
- Posting memes instead of personal info
- Creating burner accounts
- Refusing to post at all

These are not failures to participate—they are **tactics of boundary-setting**, where users reclaim some control over how they appear (or don't) within the interface.

Q4. How does this vision of data challenge dominant ideas of the interface as a neutral tool?

Answer:

It repositions the interface as a **space of power and play**, not neutrality. Interfaces are **designed to direct flows of attention, labor, and data**, but people use them in ways that **exceed, distort, or disrupt** these flows. This challenges the idea that users are simply passive or addicted—they are also **tactical, embodied, and emotionally nuanced agents** within interface systems.

Q5. What ethical or anthropological question does the text leave us with?

Answer:

Not just *how is data used?*, but **what kinds of selves, relations, and socialities become possible or impossible through datafication?** Can we imagine data systems that don't require **total legibility**, or that **make space for ambivalence, silence, and resistance?** The anthropological task is not just to analyze data use, but to **help imagine new forms of being in and against data systems.**



Final Reflection

This piece is a powerful **bridge between interface theory, anthropology, and politics**. It moves from critique to possibility—asking not just *what platforms do to people*, but *what people do with platforms*. It resonates deeply with your course's themes by showing that even in hypermediated environments, **fantasy, rhythm, play, and refusal still shape how interfaces work.**

