

TECHNOLOGY

LIVING WITH DATA

Confusing Big Data: Dropping red herrings in the database

False signals shift power dynamics in our data profiles

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by [Sara M. Watson](#) -

Editor's Note: This is the seventh installment of the [Living With Data](#) series exploring how our online data is tracked, collected and used. Do you have questions about how your personal data is being used? Curious to learn more about your daily encounters with algorithms? Email the Decoder at thedecoder@aljazeera.net or submit your question via the form [here](#). Screen shots and links are helpful clues!

If we want to live in the connected world, we have to trade off between exposing our personal information for the convenience of technology. When opting out isn't a feasible option and digital exposure is inevitable, we have to get creative.

In the [first installment of this series](#), Ebba Hierta tried to thwart her stalker socks by visiting websites outside her interests, browsing crossbows and camo clothes on Cabela's hunting supply site. That strategy dropped cookies in places that didn't match her interests and threw advertisers off her trail. And her approach demonstrated to her how targeted ads from retailers were working.

Personal data interventionists — those who purposefully change their behaviors to throw off the database — like Hierta can go to great lengths to change the way their data reflect their lives and intentions. Though their methods may be extreme for most, we can learn a lot from their experiments.

We don't need always need [special tools](#) like browser plug-ins to help us experiment with our digital environments. We can start by manipulating the inputs and watching the outputs of our data.

Teens are playing pranks on one another by hiding humorous keywords in white text, as described by danah boyd, a researcher and the author of "[It's Complicated](#)." These funny keywords are invisible to the reader but fodder for targeted advertisements. Are we human readable or machine readable?

I have seen friends declare themselves the opposite sex or plant funny interests in their Facebook profiles to see how these data points affect their feed or ads. Our friends know who we are on Facebook, so it's easy to play with sneaky ways of introducing false information into our digital profiles. Think of it as a digital version of the game of two truths and a lie.

These interventions can make it more obvious to draw out the connections between a little data lie and its effects on your experience. The false information grabs our attention more than things that subtly match our more authentic history and behavior.

At the more advanced end of the spectrum, some researchers and journalists are pulling involved stunts with their personal data.

Mat Honan, a writer for Wired, recently took his Facebook experimentation a step further. He wanted to see what would happen if he [liked everything that came through his Facebook feed for 48 hours](#). He wrote, "After checking in and liking a bunch of stuff over the course of an hour, there were no human beings in my feed anymore." When his friends started to message, worried that his account had been hacked, he also discovered the network effects of his activity on his friends' feeds.

Honan's experiment essentially broke the algorithm, rendering Facebook almost unusable. This scale of intervention isn't practical for most, but we see how being more conscious of what we choose to like (or not) affects the results in our own feeds.

Honan's experiment flooded the system, removing all meaningful signals of his behavior. You can replicate part of Honan's experiment without doing the manual labor by using a browser tool [AdNauseam](#), which works by flooding the ad system, automating the process of clicking on every ad you come across.

Hiding in plain sight by sending confusing signals is one approach to intervening in your database dossier. Another approach is to avoid leaving a trail completely.

Knowing how important [key life events](#) are to advertisers, Janet Vertesi tried [hide her pregnancy](#) from the Internet. She [detailed her efforts](#) to mask any behavior that suggested the coming change in her life, using everything from [Tor](#) to mask her browsing history to paying cash for gift cards to avoid using her credit cards.

Vertesi describes this project as an "infrastructural inversion." It's another extreme case, but it shows us just how far we might have to go to address the extent of our digital exposure.

In each of these cases, whether automated or hand-curated, obfuscating or avoiding, it's difficult to anticipate the future hidden effects of these interventions, both in the short term and the long term.

If only at a personal scale, database intervention tactics enable us to intervene in our digital profiles and experiences. Whether throwing false positives into the dossier, evading the gaze of the database, we can intervene to shift the power dynamics in our otherwise asymmetrical data profiles. Even at the most extreme, these tactics model how to critically interrogate the system for ourselves and teach us about how these data-driven systems work.

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