How to future proof your privacy

From self-commodification to noisy browsing, the internet renegades of Berlin's transmediale festival reveal their top tips for subverting a datafied world

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"Sortintosh"
Courtesy of Giacomo Carmagnola, via giacomocarmagnola.tumblr.com

Wherever you stand on data privacy – and in the UK, it <u>seems</u> you're either for Cameron's "expertise" or against it – the automated collection of our personal communications online is reaching the point where it cannot be ignored. <u>Transmediale</u>, Berlin's annual festival of media art and digital culture, rounded off January with its own take on the surveillance age; under the enigmatic header <u>Capture All</u>, artists and activists working at the front line of the data rights battlefield made their case. With a dataset of diverse approaches up for discussion, there was nevertheless a shared ethos behind events at the emphatically lower-case festival: that is, while ignoring the datafied world won't make it go away, beating it at its own game it might just work. After transmediale shut up shop, we caught up with a selection of the artists and engineers whose tools propose new methods for resisting surveillance. As protest art enters the app age, several prime targets come into view: online profiling, greedy advertisers and even the bright future of biological surveillance to come.

DON'T CENSOR YOURSELF – OBFUSCATE YOUR 'SELF'

It is a truth universally acknowledged, and more relevant than ever in the digital age, that self-censorship can be as insidious a force as overt governmental control. For media activist <u>Mushon Zer-Aviv</u>, opting out is not an option. The alternative is obfuscation – that is, the production and communication of misleading, ambiguous or false data. The aim, he says, is to "evade, distract or confuse data gatherers, or diminish the reliability (and value) of data aggregations." Like everything, there's an app (or two) for that: Zer-Aviv has himself designed <u>AdNauseum.io</u>, a browser add-on that clicks on all the ads so you don't have to. "This fight is far from over," he says. "It just got messier and way more fun."

BROWSE NOISILY

As AdNauseum demonstrates, the key to obfuscation doesn't lie in ignoring data collection and hoping for the best, nor in taking part in some *Hackers*-style daredevilry – instead, you can embed easy tools into your daily browsing experience that will do all the hard work for you. "Why not just let them have your data", asserts artist and hacker Daniel C Howe, "and a whole lot more as well!" He developed the ad-busting add-on in collaboration with Zer-Aviv, as well as other tools such as <u>TrackMeNot</u>. The latter, a browser extension that looks for decoy search queries at random, means your actual web searches are ingeniously concealed in plain sight. "Use obfuscation tools to fill their databases with noise and make a statement that you don't approve of the tyranny of big data."

ERASE YOUR DNA

When it comes to the surveillance age, the concept of intrusion by electronic systems has quickly graduated from CCTV camera to your Gmail account. It isn't long, says new media artist and academic <u>Heather Dewey Hagborg</u>, until that all-seeing eye enters our bodies. "Electronic surveillance currently pervades most Americans' daily lives, with voyeurs ranging from corporations to the government, police, and private citizens," she says. "I came to realise our biological information was also at risk – but wasn't being discussed." For Hagborg, the fact that bio-surveillance is in its early stages offers a head start on catching out our new voyeurs before it's too late: "Unlike the overwhelming reach of electronic surveillance and powerlessness many of us feel in the face of revelations such as Snowden's, we still have a tremendous opportunity to stop that kind of surveillance from reaching into the biological realm. We have power here to shape the legislation and social norms governing these practices." Her recent launch, <u>biononymous.me</u>, offers a community for research and discussion around biological privacy, including handy <u>guides</u> to erasing your DNA.

SELF-COMMODIFY YOUR IMMATERIAL LABOUR

Commodification of personal data might be all well and good, if it weren't for the fact that complete strangers are the ones accruing the big bucks from it. Aiming to make your immaterial labour material again, <u>commodify.us</u> is a platform co-created by NZ-based artist <u>Birgit Bachler</u> that allows you to download your personal data and discover how to use it. But it's not all about the dollar bills. "My collaborators and I want to encourage users to explore the commercial value, but also the artistic value, of their personal data," explains Bachler. "A download of your Facebook Archive or Google Takeout reveals quite a lot about you and your behavior on these platforms, but the formats of these datasets are often quite unattractive and inaccessible." Beautifying hard datasets seems to be a speciality: another project saw Bachler transform big data into decorative <u>wallpaper</u>.

CREATE YOUR OWN (OFFLINE) WIRELESS NETWORK

Walking with your head in the Cloud will be a familiar feeling for anyone with a smartphone. Transmediale brought together artists, engineers and city planners who are working on a very different concept of wireless connectivity – offline networks. One such tool that has gained traction is the personal networks produced by <u>Pirate Box</u>: a DIY anonymous file-sharing and communications system that is, by all accounts, friendlier than its skull and cross-bones logo would suggest. "My thinking is that we don't need to upload our data to Facebook, Dropbox or other services to share it with our friends or neighbours", says creator Matthias Strubel. "The possibility of creating local offline networks (that work like hotspots) opens up countless possibilities to circumvent government censorship."

Cover image courtesy of Giacomo Carmagnola, click <u>here</u> to visit his site

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