The anxieties of big data

We live under a world of constant surveillance where everything we do, watch and every link we click on is being amassed as data that is then used for many different purposes. This has brought a new issue called ”surveillant anxiety” which is the fear that our personal data could reveal intimate aspects of ourselves, However, this data could also be misrepresented as “it can both show too much and not enough”. This issue becomes a domino effect since the fact that we live in this constant state of fear adds up to other socio-political issues. We simply want to hide from the big brother above us.

On the other hand, those who gather the data have a certain level of anxiety too since gathering to much data can be problematic, in other words, “more data doesn’t mean more accuracy” which entails enormous technical and ethical difficulties. For example, “The bigger the data gets, the more small things can be overlooked”. For example, the police had substantial information about the Tsarnaev brothers, responsible of the Boston Marathon attacks, and yet this information was not enough to tip off the police and act before the attacks happened, thus, demonstrating the flaws of big data collection.

How do we fight against this constant surveillance. To some the answer is to be Normcore, which is a form of camouflage. To blend in the crowd by not drawing attention, or by simple using more sophisticated data encryption.

The Internet's Original Sin

The online advertising industry has become the necessary evil of the XXI century. The moment we go online, no matter what page, we are encountered with tons of adds which often seem to target us in a personal way that are often too close for comfort.
According to Ethan Zuckerman, this is not a malevolent plan from evil people trying to missuuse our data, instead it all started with good intentions which unfortunately went the other way.

Zuckerman worked for a company called Tripod.com which originally targeted college students but it never took off. The business model that got them funded was advertising. The original purpose was to analyze users' personal homepages so they could better target ads to them.
However they ended up creating perhaps the most annoying aspect of the web, the pop-up ad. Which dissociates the content displayed on the ad from the page, which was a concern of the companies being advertised as they did not necessarily wanted to be associated with the page being visited.
Soon after, advertising became the "default business model on the web" as it was the most convenient way to put into place and sell to potential investment agencies and therefore make money.

However, in order to make money from it is not really easy, for example " last quarter, Facebook reported that it had 1.32 billion users, but the profit per user is just under $0.60."
The facebook example puts things into perspective, in order to create "better ads" one most require to go deeper into web surveillance and data gathering which would then make the ads more effective.
Once again we run into the issue of privacy and surveillance anxiety. And yet, we seem to have become used to it. However the personalization of ads could have dire consequences as they could lead us towards "forms of ideological isolation that divide us into rival camps that cannot agree on anything". According to Maciej Cegłowski, an important and influential programmer, he claims that we should be able to review the data gathered by companies while also limiting the time this data is held.

Locative Media Revisited

With the fast development of technology in the early 2000's, the possibilities of creating art projects using locative media have been explored in many different ways by many artists. Although there was some big expectations regarding such projects, it never really enjoyed a period of apogee.

Regardless of this, many projects have taken place that have taken locative media to the next level. Philipp Ronnenberg's project Open Positioning System (OPS) explores seismic frequencies generated from machines in order to triangulate a specific location such project was created as a challenge to the GPS which is controlled by the government and military agencies. Since we have little to no control over them, how could we have access to other forms of geolocation?

By offering a similar approach aimed to the public, Hojun Song created a DIY satellite which can be sent to space with the purpose of sensing microwave signals from space that prove the Big Bang explosion which are then translated to numbers that are used in a lottery game while also creating computer graphics.

Other projects aim to pinpoint irregularities in data collection like Border Pumping by Julian Oliver.
A very original form of playing with locative data collection is the Quotidian Record by Brian House which consists of all the locations that House visited throughout the course of a year, each place is represented by a musical note which creates an 11 minute piece.

Along with other similar projects we are able to see a trend between them, they question the locative technology itself how it is manipulated and how this data is shown back to us and shapes our reality as the effects of it are far greater than we imagine. Thus, by turning these technologies on themselves and by experimenting with them we are able to have a better understanding of their effect in our lives.

Howard ends the article by admitting that Facebook has become a powerhouse for all types of discussions and that instead of finding ways of replacing it or simply abandoning the platform, we should strive to find ways of improving it.

Feed my feed

On this article, Dorothy Howard argues the consequences that groups found in sites such as Facebook, have an impact in our lives and how they offer a new form of social and political discussion while also acknowledging the flaws they have.

Howard explains how it is possible to find facebook groups for absolutely anything these days, from the most banal topics to very thought and action engaging ones. This groups, also known as communities have also developed certain rules that should be followed in order to omit any type of discriminatory behaviour. These groups, as absurd as some maybe all follow their own set of rules which are monitored by one or several admins.

Howard argues that perhaps new platforms should be created in order to give the users more autonomy and freedom in what they say rather than being overwatched by someone which emulates the capitalistic censorship that we encounter outside of our private lives.
Other platforms like e-flux Conversations and non-profit organization offer the alternative of giving the user more control of their own content.

Howard concludes with an experiment she did by creating her own Facebook group and argues that so called “super users” should be paid for their intellectual property posted online. Although the group was build upon an ironic idea this same irony should be question on itself as it raises questions on other forms of social discussions.