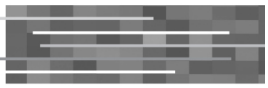
Lurking

HOW A PERSON BECAME A USER



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Introduction

Someone else's boarding pass fluttered out of a book that I picked up secondhand. Printed on the strip of paper was information for an Alaska Airlines frequent flier. I needed a bookmark, so I held on to it. Each time I returned to my reading, I would see the seat number, boarding time at 5:00 a.m., and unfamiliar woman's name. I recognized "SEA" as Seattle, but "PVR" was new to me. So I looked it up. Puerto Vallarta. How nice.

Reading the book, sometimes my mind would wander to the life of this woman leaving before daybreak for what had to be a vacation. Maybe it was the cheapest option on Kayak; why else would she get up that early? Or maybe she's an early-riser athlete or works a graveyard shift. Eventually my curiosity got the best of me and I looked her up on Twitter. I didn't say hi or scroll her timeline too deep. My own idea of a nightmare is a rando tweeting at me, "Hey, I got that book you traded in. Nice to e-meet ya!" Someone might find such an exchange amusing, but it strikes me as boundary-crossing. Even what I could see, outside her knowing, felt out of bounds. I couldn't bring myself to click through her archive to see how that vacation went. It struck me as privacy I should honor as an internet stranger. It was not for me to riffle through her life online and attempt to construct a narrative. I was contented just to

make this odd one-sided connection. I tossed the boarding pass away when I finished the book.

Anyway, now I know the origins of this used paperback. That's lurking.

I don't mean lurking as an act of reconnaissance, eavesdropping, or something sneaky. It is simply that by nature of having this internet, people are so immediate and present—even absolute strangers. Connecting people is one of the things the internet can do. Internet users—like me, probably you—connect to people we like, people we do not like, people we know, people we do not know, friends, family, workmates, any kind of acquaintance, really. We are even connected to nonperson human-mimicking human conglomerates, like bots posting in Markov text, mishmashing a corpus of the words of hundreds, even thousands of actual humans. We can engage with people outside the rule-bound linear progression of offline relationships, and discover information about another person, miles and years from the person they were when they posted it. Try responding to a post on a message board dated a while ago, maybe ten years or more. That person might have lived in five cities between then and now, and fallen in and out of love three times, but the person they once were remains a notional snapshot trace, as if it were yesterday, offering thoughts on gardens, allergies, movies, or recipe ingredients.

Lurking can be a waiting room before communication, in brief delay like the brutal clang of an old dial-up modem sound, a moment to pause and prepare oneself for an exchange with others, to get one's feet wet before plunging into the network and its encasement and amplification of identity. Or it could be an act like reading, for work or research or general curiosity. From the beginning, on that guileless but no less thorny internet, lurking was understood as a custom. Perhaps no one ever signed your GeoCities page guestbook, responded to your comment on

a BBS, or left a comment on your blog, but you could never be sure the words were for nothing, read by no one—no one could feel totally alone. Perhaps someone was watching: lurkers, warm and indirect, good people, potential friends, even—not creeps, but maybe a little bit weird.

Metaphors get clunky when we talk about the internet because there is much stuff—forms (images, text, videos, audio, maps) and content (advertising, rumors, job listings, advertising, opinions, ideas, facts, advertising, faces, jokes, advertising, lies, pictures of dogs, advertising, pictures of babies, anything)—and it feels like every user inherits a job, an unpaid library science gig, just for having to think about classifications and representation, the epistemic meaning of data and the written word and images. Identity becomes scraps of enterprise, content and dis-content, an unceasing whirl of desiderata and refuse. Anything personally targeted while impersonal is directionless, but those are the results of this exchange. Some data is "shared," some is taken, the harvest is shaken together in a sillage of algorithmic modeling, floating around, predicting and approximating, while never quite defining the user in the middle of it all.

"User" is a particular status, activity, and state of being, but the word is hated by some. Don Norman, who coined "UX"—user experience—said in 2008, "One of the horrible words we use is 'users.' I am on a crusade to get rid of the word 'users.' I would prefer to call them 'people.'" But the word "people," as the artist Olia Lialina responded in her essay, "Turing Complete User," hides the "existence of two classes of people—developers and users." It is not a mellifluous word or elegant, but "user" is, uh, useful. Developers scripted these mazes, these interfaces, which users *use* to communicate and keep in touch. There are humans on the outside and humans on the inside; the platforms created by and used by humans outline and

define identities, boxing users in, while tendering new methods of expression.

Despite the obvious power imbalance, users—rather than developers—are often scapegoated as the internet at its worst. Over the relatively short period of time that the internet has existed, users have been cast as narcissists, if not the cause of the downfall of civilization, as the media spotlights bad actors as representative of the internet populace, eliding the quagmire of company policies that foment abuses and calcify hatred. “Engagement” is the inscrutable basis over which these companies present themselves as commonweal rather than mercenary: these companies—the platforms—show commitment to advertisers before users, while expressing otherwise in corporate communications.

“I am a human being, not an algorithm,” Kristy Milland, an Amazon Mechanical Turk worker, once wrote in an email to jeff@amazon.com, describing how she relies on MTurk income to keep her “family safe from foreclosure,” and wishes to be seen on the platform as a “highly skilled laborer,” rather than hidden from requesters like lines of code. She wasn’t speaking as a user, but as a laborer. But even users can be conscripted to these platforms just the same, subject to the whims of Silicon Valley mega-corporations as if they were exploited workers or dispirited constituents. Google has its users perform free micro-labor when they solve reCAPTCHA puzzles—ostensibly to keep bots from accessing websites, but in practice, a distributed system of cleaning various machine-learning corpuses. Many of us must maintain online identities with major platforms to stay employed or up-to-date with community functions like church groups and school committees. Consequently, these companies have unassailable leverage over users, to influence and frustrate behaviors, relationships, communities, and identities.

Those who are human beings, not algorithms, have quiet corners, too, the places to lurk or hide somehow, and that's what interests me. The focus of this book is identity, which is why Amazon and Apple, titans in scale and influence, do not figure in as heavily as the other major tech companies. Right now neither plays third wheel in online relationships and neither has much stake in venues of self-presentation. Although it is amusing to read things like Stewart Brand's review of *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* ("As the guy in the subtitle, I might be expected to have all kinds of eye-rolling cavils with [Fred] Turner's book, but I don't") or MacKenzie Bezos's one-star review of *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon* ("Jeff didn't read Remains of the Day until a year after he started Amazon"), as of now, Amazon is primarily a retailer and not a social site. Its issues of labor exploitation, monopolistic practices, surveillance, and control relate to the domain of private infrastructure and merchandising. Apple, similarly, is a business with customers. The role of consumer or worker has a modern edge, but usership is even less defined—what is traded, and the cost of it, is hard to see.

Like Tron, from the 1982 film, I "fight for the users," but that's not all this book is about. Community on the internet once seemed like the future, and now there is a past. The following chapters cover the shift to contemporary internet communication habits and culture starting with the launch of the World Wide Web. Part of the appeal, in the beginning, was the opportunity to disguise an identity, to hide under usernames—and with no face in photographs, your language was your avatar. Later, the internet transitioned away from anonymity toward online environments that demand authenticity, even if there are just as many lies. I write this as a longtime participant. Over the course of this shift, I grew circumspect. Once I spoke freely and shared my dreams with strangers. Then the real

world fastened itself to my digital life. My name is attached to most of my online activity, so my form on the internet is shaped more like a shadow than a vapor. My idle youth online largely—thankfully—evaporated in the sun, but more recent-ish old posts breeze along, colliding with and confusing new images of myself that I try to construct. If I wanted to give up on the internet, or if I even could, I would have to leave the data—the comments, my connections—every single social site holds over me as collateral for my presence.

The story of the internet is not a tale of sanctuary taken for granted and trod on. The internet was never peaceful, never fair, never good, but early on it was benign, and use of it was more imaginative, less common, and less obligatory. Blight always lurked beneath the internet's enchantments, and beside the chaos is wonder. It is an ether that fills the abyss of time and loneliness. It is a venue for curiosity and longing. Life online is powered by traits and conditions in opposition: anonymity and visibility, privacy and transparency, real and fake, centralized and decentralized, physical and digital, friend and stranger, autonomy and constraint, with an operational clash of values between human ambiguity and machine explicitness. Humanity is the spice, the substrate, that machines cannot replicate. At its worst and at its best, the internet extracts humanity from users and serves it back to other users.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Olia Lialina's 2012 essay "Turing Complete User" is available on her website: contemporary-home-computing.org/turing-complete-user/. The email from a Mechanical Turk worker to Jeff Bezos was part of a letter-writing campaign organized through the MTurk collective Dynamo. Will Oremus has written about Amazon as a surveillance company, with products like Ring and Echo, in the Medium publication *OneZero* ("Amazon Is Watching," June 27, 2019). Goodreads and Twitch, the livestreaming video platform, are Amazon subsidiaries, but their social media operations are small in comparison to services like cloud computing, logistics, and retail. A good explanation of the difference between users and customers can be found in "The Discovery of Behavioral Surplus," in Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (Public Affairs, 2019): "There is no economic exchange, no price, and no profit. Nor do users function in the role of workers … Users are not paid for their labor, nor do they operate the means of production."

1. SEARCH

In 2015, Google restructured itself and renamed its holding company "Alphabet," but no one seems to actually call it that other than its shareholders. There was an NPR segment in 2014 about the questions the New York Public Library fielded from the 1940s to the '80s ("Before the Internet, Librarians Would 'Answer Everything'—And Still Do," December 28, 2014). Note cards documenting the questions were also featured on the NYPL Instagram account at the time. I got the number "2,738 websites in 1994" and other figures from the website Internet Live Stats. Also, it should be noted that Archie was the first internet search engine—created by Alan Emtage