Conceptual Outline

There are a number of ways in which one might approach the mechanics and inner workings of social media and collective networks. One way is to consider the role of profiles. As users of and on various websites, we create profiles to both interact with others and to represent ourselves within cyberspace. Profiles, in a sense, become vessels for personal (and private) information and in turn serve as a stepping stone for what has been called an ’objectification’ of users. What exactly constitutes an online profile? What are the politics governing what is considered relevant (or eligible) information in creating a profile and to what degree can a profile said to be representative of one (or more) person(s)?

These are some of the questions that we hope to explore in our final project. We aim to create what might be considered a ”mock profile generator”, in which strings of unrelated data (drawn from various API-sources and/or JSON-files) are combined to create a seemingly plausible, if uncanny profile. New profiles can be generated at will, with various kinds of personal information provided, including age, sex, and picture. These sources of data are all unrelated, but by integrating them in proximity (within the graphical confines of a social media-looking website), they become somewhat of a collective whole; a sort of semantical gestalt that is perceived, however erroneously, to be representative of the same thing: a person.

It is not merely the product, but also the processes leading to the creation of the program that are of interest to us. In creating our own pseudo-profile generator we ultimately stipulate certain criteria for what should or should not be an integral part of a profile. What is considered relevant or acceptable information with regards to a profile? In mimicking the creator-role of profile templates, we aim to critically examine the politics governing these decisions.

On one level, a profile serves to (more or less) accurately represent a person and to allow communication between profiles. On another, they serve as a sort of abstract objectification of a person. The commodification of people is highly topical and relevant issue and we hope to tap into the ongoing discussion regarding online privacy and social media transparency by creating a program that can literally create profiles at will. Questions related to how our pseudo-profiles are ultimately not true profiles ultimately lead to difficult considerations about what constitutes a real profile and whether or not a profile can even be said to be accurate representations of a person. One potential point of discussion might be this: if the end goal of some social media sites is to commodify the habits and interests of a given profile, does it even matter if the profile is legitimate?

Our profiles are of course not real in any traditional sense but composed of various sets and strings of unrelated data. We are creating a sort of Frankenstein’s monster in cyberspace. It is of some importance to us that while the profile criteria and program itself is of course decided and designed by us, the data “fleshing out” the profile is independent and not of our creation. In mish-mashing various data streams we highlight the availability of data (through API’s and similar) and the potentially absurd ways in which data may be displayed in proximity, creating a false sense of causal relation and relevance.

Aside from the potential for commodification, the value of profiles, arguably, is their interconnectedness and interdependence. Similarly, our pseudo-profiles are indeed made up of data across the web and, also connected to other fake profiles. We hope to demonstrate how this sense of illusory sense of interconnectedness bestows the profiles a degree of authenticity.

To summarize, our final project is one in which fake website profiles are generated based on a slew of different datasets, demonstrating the potential absurdity of profiles as a concept, the problematic issue(s) of objectifying people on the internet and challenging notions regarding the exact nature, use and worth of profiles themselves.