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Project Anonymous: When Anonymity meets Artwork

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Abstract

In an attempt to build a new type of exhibition channel for artists, student programmer Kira Wencek, and I developed an anonymous art-sharing web platform under the moniker of Project Anonymous. By allowing as much freedom of identity construction as possible, the intention is to inspire artists to share work more freely without the numerous drawbacks that an established persona can create. However, constructing an app revolving around the idea of anonymity can bring about many questions regarding its purpose as well as obstacles when developing the app.

In an attempt to mitigate the drawbacks of current online avenues for creative content sharing, the platform addresses privacy issues, visibility issues, and external influence over art pieces. The features and functionality of the platform can affect and compromise its anonymous and egalitarian nature, and are examined in terms of the application in the present, and the hypothetical implications the platform may have in the future. While I conducted research, and oversaw the general direction of the application, Kira programmed the platform, combining our abilities to put theory into practice.

While the project began under a shared premise of examining how users react to a lack of external validation, with the application of theory, the platform soon came to mean much more. Project Anonymous examines identity construction, privacy breach, and the economical implications of major database platforms in a digital age.

Project Anonymous: When Anonymity meets Artwork

Art falls under the influence of a variety of factors that help to shape its meaning and purpose to viewers. External aspects such as the space in which it is viewed, the time at which it is viewed, the artist(s) who created the work, and pre-established criticisms made of the work aid in building its semiotic narrative. One aspect in particular, the artist influencing the work, has transformed with the establishment of social media and the online personas that follow with these tools. Identity is no longer constricted to what an individual presents in the physical world, but also the online counterpart that is constructed through the online activities and persona that is portrayed.

Building an identity on social media has brought about a new dynamic of influence over artwork, and conversely influence over the artists who create the work itself. Artists' identities influence artwork in the sense that all prejudices and preconceived notions place expectations in viewers' heads that are aware of the artist's identity. Knowing this, artists' work may then be influenced over the identity that fans and viewers have constructed for the artist. Self-censorship amongst artists and content creators in an age where it seems as though tensions are rising amongst those of contrasting opinions is the premise of what we call "Project Anonymous," hereafter referred to as PA.

The Establishment

In 2015, I had an inkling of an idea to build a social media application for artists to share, collaborate, and be inspired by one another's work. To bring this

idea to fruition, I brought a team of students together, all with different skill sets. While the team went through many members, Kira Wencek, who has become the programmer for PA, stuck throughout. Fortunately, the team at the time realized early on that the group had neither the resources, nor the want to develop the application and so we disbanded before we could begin building it. When deciding upon a contingency plan, a discussion was sparked about how validation seems to play a large role in content creation based social media platforms. This idea led to the establishment of a theme that seemed worthwhile to investigate based on Kira's and my interests: anonymous art.

Taking inspiration from popular social media platforms Instagram and Yik-Yak, Kira and I planned to create a platform that allows users to upload pictures or text without linking back to a profile with the intention of mitigating the drawbacks that derive from the artist's identity. Perhaps an artist has a contrarian opinion that they feel needs to be heard; PA would allow a space that gives the artists full control over whether or not the contrarian art links back to their profile. Consider an artist who is known for a particular style of art, or works primarily in one medium; PA could allow that individual to explore new mediums of art where they may not have much experience, and get an unbiased opinion about the work. With this in mind, the platform mitigates issues of vulnerability that the artist faces, creating something reminiscent of a 'safe space' for artists of all types to express their work without as little damage to their established identities as possible. The idea of total freedom of expression without social repercussions seemed to be a very enticing

subject, perhaps shining light on how social pressures suppress contrarian or evocative artists.

On the other hand, it is very possible that an anonymous platform such as this could fail. For one, it seems that validation is a large motivator for many, and the lack thereof could be enough to push someone away. Additionally, the goal of many artists is to make money doing their work, and PA would not make it easy to garner a following that allows one to monetize their work. These questions were all taken into account during the development of the platform.

Studying both computer science and art, Kira was responsible for programming PA. All of her time in the project was spent learning to code, becoming familiar with a new development platform, and putting together the platform piece by piece. Studying under the tutelage of University of Rhode Island professor of computer science David Brown, Kira's main concern was assuring that the platform worked smoothly, looked pleasing, and was in something of a working condition by the end of the project. On the other hand, I acted as the theorist of the project, guided by professor of communication studies at the University of Rhode Island, Dr. Ian Reyes. My role was to study the theory behind the premise of the project, and contemplate possibilities in which the research could be incorporated into the platform. However, the theory also uncovered aspects of our project that we had not foreseen, bringing about new possible implications.

Going into this project, Kira and I experienced the 'honeymoon' phase of creating something new; we believed that our project would have the potential to change the way artists viewed their artwork. However, it very quickly became

evident that this would not happen. It would be no fault of our own, but rather a reflection of the patterns of relations that humans have with technology. Even if PA grew to the size of a major social media platform, it is foolish to think that it would have a lasting effect on society from a macro viewpoint. However, this does not mean that PA cannot affect individuals on a smaller scale.

Approach

The Research

When starting a project such as PA, it is important to hypothesize all viable angles and outcomes of the application to properly prepare, approaching any issues that may compromise anonymity and vulnerability in advance. Keeping this in mind, the perspectives of three different theorists were chosen to provide insight as to the implications, pitfalls, benefits, and difficulties of PA. Manuel Castells' *The Network Society* (1996), theorizes a world in which connectivity through the Internet builds a more egalitarian society through a holistic lens. Castells' research establishes a frame regarding the effects of networks and the Internet. danah boyd's studies revolve around how social networks affect children and teens, particularly how privacy and identity mold the world of our youth, and their futures. Much of PA's features were influenced from the ideas presented in her research. Finally, *Who Owns the Future* (2014), by Jaron Lanier provides much insight as to the economic and privacy implications our platforms, and many others like it, have on the future.

The Network Society – Building a Theoretical Base

At the beginnings of the World Wide Web, it seemed to be a tool that would most definitely revolutionize the way individuals communicate. In hindsight, many would agree that this is true, one of them being Manuel Castells. Castells is a sociologist who was one of the progenitors of the term “network society,” outlining a world in which networks holistically alter society to fit a utopian image. In fact, “globalization is another way to refer to the network society,” although not quite as idealistic (Castells, 2005, pg. 5). His works are indicative of what many individuals were feeling in regards to the potential of the internet at its onset. Establishing a theoretical base to build off of, Castells sets the scene for the potential of a platform such as PA.

More so than the theory itself, Castells establishes a point where our research can begin. From this reading, I began to study the terminology and theories regarding technologies impact on civilization going forward. Technological determinism, the belief that technology drives a societies culture and social structure, was discussed in great detail in meetings with my advisor during this time. While Castells examines society in a holistic sense, danah boyd focuses in on topics largely relevant to PA, particularly how identities are constructed via social media and the World Wide Web.

Identity Construction

Social media has allowed individuals to build identities beyond one’s physical self. In these virtual spaces that platforms such as Facebook construct, these

identities can be referred to as online personas, established by the information shared, and the activity of the user, namely the pictures users share, posts users write, and the interactions that users have with others. danah boyd, whose work revolves around the topic of identity construction, is a Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, founder of research institute Data & Society, and a visiting professor at New York University. As she explains, her research “examines the intersection between technology and society” (boyd, n.d.). Much of her work revolves around how social media impacts the culture and identities of young people, delving into auxiliary topics such as privacy, visibility, and, more recently, big data. boyd seems to take the most pragmatic approach to the impact of technology on society, and does not frame technology to have a utopian, nor dystopian affect on society.

boyd’s work brings about questions regarding the implications of PA in many facets. Most glaringly, whether or not the platform would be considered detrimental to society, particularly in its dealings with hateful content, and the possibility of its emergence of what I call a “Hate Space,” which I will touch on later. As mentioned before, boyd also points out how “Old Practices and patterns continue to thrive in new media” (boyd, 2012, pg. 320), henceforth bringing about a realization amongst Kira and me that regardless of the implications of PA, even if the platform hypothetically became a popular tool, its effect on art in a general sense would most likely be insignificant. However, as mentioned earlier, on an individual level, PA could affect artists greatly. One aspect of which would be one’s outlook over privacy.

A large distinction made in boyd's work, most notably "Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck" (2008a), regards the relationship of privacy and vulnerability. Privacy refers to a more objective view of how one's personal info is accessible to others, while vulnerability is a more subjective feeling on how easily one perceives their info to be accessed. While one may post a piece of info on one's social media, it is the ease of access, and the searchability, the ability to find older posts via search, that affect vulnerability. This plays a large role on PA, bringing us to reconsider various features in the application that I will touch on later. In reflection, boyd is where most of the discussion on this project derived from based on her pragmatic approach, and the relevancy of her topics.

Political Economy

Jaron Lanier's *Who Owns the Future?* (2014) covers the effects that big data has on society. More specifically, Lanier examines the fall of the middle class through the effects of big data, and how this tool provides more power to corporations and users of what he dubs Siren Servers. In Lanier's words:

Siren Servers gather data from the network, often without having to pay for it. The data is analyzed using the most powerful available computers, run by the very best available technical people. The results of the analysis are kept secret, but are used to manipulate the rest of the world to advantage. (Lanier, 2014, pg. 73)

As larger corporations begin to utilize Siren Servers more, smaller corporations and businesses are muscled out due to their lack of access to these servers that present

patterns in customers and sales to maximize profit, thus distributing more power and wealth to the upper class. Lanier is largely pessimistic about technology's role in the coming future, often referring to a vision of a dystopian society where market regulation does not exist, and hyper-large corporations withhold basic necessities such as food and water. While I view this as being hyperbolic to prove a point, Lanier provides insight into hypothetical economic procedures, such as data collection, which an app like ours could utilize, and may potentially be dangerous.

Spectrums of Possibility

Each theorist provides a very different viewpoint on the influence of technology; Castells has a largely utopian view, Lanier has a dystopian view, and boyd falls somewhere in between. These varying viewpoints are what, ironically, connect these theorists. Often times, those with an idea for a venture can fall into the trap of overestimating their product, and so PA fell under a similar mindset initially. Castells' network society has yet to be realized, and so the better path to take in terms of an outlook on PA would be through boyd's pragmatic lens. Much of the contemplations of this platform are built around how boyd deconstructs social media, and addresses issues regarding privacy, visibility, and identity construction.

Discussion

Initial Implications

At the conception of PA, our premise of the platform was quite different from what it transformed into. As mentioned briefly earlier, PA was established off of the idea that art is heavily influenced by the context in which it is presented. Whether it be the platform or the artist, these factors externally affect perceptions of artwork. It seems as though there's discussion about a way to view art with as little external influence as possible, viewing the art as a separate entity.

Arguably, PA began as something of a safe space for artists. With the mask of anonymity, artists are not held back by the idea of repercussions for their works, or a lasting impression on the artist. While it is not a prime idea for building a following, PA could be a wonderful space for artists to try and experiment with different types of art that may reflect as 'amateur' or perhaps controversial. For some, it could be their primary source of art, replicating something of an online version of Banksy. In theory, levels of anonymity are up to the user. For example, if an artist wants to include their signature on a piece, it is doable.

Privacy vs. Visibility

danah boyd makes a great point about how visibility affects our perception of risky behavior: "We see more risky behaviors not because risky acts have increased, but because the technology makes them more conspicuous" (2009, pg. 3). Is the censoring of platforms such as this not promoting ignorance? boyd then goes on to describe how, because our society is unable to understand the root of the issue, we fall into denial and place our blame on what seems to many as the most obvious cause: the internet.

In my mind, PA could be the platform that rebels against ignorance, yet this could easily be an idealistic mindset. Who are Kira and I to play god over what is allowed, and what is not? Our biases would certainly sway what content is included, therefore creating another largely mediated space. Another issue, trolling, defined by dictionary.com as “to post inflammatory or inappropriate messages or comments on (the Internet, especially a message board) for the purpose of upsetting other users and provoking a response” (2017), would also be an issue that could arise, though it remains largely unsolvable across all of the social media platforms. If Kira and I remained lenient on trolling, and the website was filled with hateful, yet passable content, would it turn away new users, rendering us to a market that’s too small to sustain us? On the other hand, are we really allowing our space to be as unmediated as possible if we remove trolls in excess? Though we may have never had to face these problems, the potential for trolls molded every decision we made in the design of the platform. Eventually, we had to make a decision.

When viewing a submission on the PA platform, users have the option to flag it as inappropriate. To keep the process more democratic to the users, and to take some workload off of Kira and me, a certain number of flags are needed on a post before it is put into review, which would be dependent on the size of the user base, and the amount of submissions. After a certain period of time, let’s say a week, if a post were not to get the necessary amounts of flags for review, the flag counter would return back to zero. This feature was constructed in such a way to better determine whether or not the work in question is truly hateful, as opposed to being offensive to the minority of users. If a post is to make it up to Kira and me, then it is

up to us to determine whether or not the submission would be removed. This left a very vital question up to Kira and me: what should be removed under the terms of being 'hateful'?

In our discussions over questionable content, we never quite came to a completely solidified answer. Beginning with a basic outline, we agreed on: no senseless violence, no pornography, no text-based solicitations & advertisements, and of course, nothing illegal. However, both senseless violence and pornography can be very subjective terms, and would eventually come upon Kira and me to decide what that would be defined as. While it was not discussed between the two of us, a better idea would possibly be to implement a user based decision system where a random jury of users decides whether or not the content in question is passable. With this comes its own foreseeable fault, yet it may prove to be more true to the artwork if a more democratic system were to be utilized.

In danah boyd's "Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck" (2008a), she states how "...privacy is not simply about the state of an inanimate object or set of bytes; it is about the sense of vulnerability that an individual experiences when negotiating data" (pg. 14). The idea of privacy versus vulnerability was a pressing issue in the development of the platform; while privacy is what many tend to think about when it comes to how their data is viewed by the public, in many cases on social media, it is the sense of vulnerability that determines users actions. This occurs regardless of the actual privacy of their content, which can be compromised in many unseen ways that will be discussed later on. With this in mind, it bore heavy influence on the

design and features of the app, yet it was not necessarily intended to be this way from the start.

As Kira and I sifted through possible features, we began to realize that, as the platform became more robust, the more the visibility became compromised. Not only did we plan to mitigate the amount of influence artists have on their artwork, but we also planned to remove as much revisiting to a piece of artwork as possible. This was done to keep users from spamming pieces, whether it is by creating fake accounts, or going online through different computers to leave trolling comments, or spam the voting feature. This resulted in scrapping a tag feature.

Something that changed the dynamics of social media, and which plays a large role in our project is the function of search in a platform. With the onset of creating our project, we had intended a search feature to be included, as it typically comes standard with any sort of large content-filled databases. However, search is a huge liability to vulnerability, and according to boyd, it completely alters the social dynamic of online activity. What was once hidden behind new content is suddenly researchable, and so increases both the visibility and vulnerability of the artwork; hence, our decision to rescind our initial decision. While it may seem like a minute detail, we came to realize that each decision we made weighed heavily on the possible implications that the project would hold.

Big Data

Every aspect of study up until this point revolved around the “front end” functionality of the app, referring to everything that the users can see, including the

aesthetic and behavior of the app. However, Jaron Lanier brings about interesting questions regarding the “back end” functionality of the app, referring to how the server works, and what sort of information it collects on the users. Lanier discusses Siren Servers in *Who Owns the Future?* (2014). These are applications and websites that collect and store data on users’ histories on the website in order to later build an internet portfolio that is sold to other companies. This is, for the wide scope of large-scale free online services and applications, a very lucrative option to keep them monetarily free. Of course, many may question just how free these services are, myself included.

This brings the platform to the point of full circle. At what cost would PA exist? On the back end of platform functionality, it is possible that Kira implements data collection that determines a user’s tastes and interests based off of the artwork they like. Of course, this would be a costly venture, yet if we had the option, would we take advantage of it? This was a reason why we decided to remove a tagging feature. Not only would a feature like this compromise the visibility of the users’ content, but also possibly their privacy. With the inclusion of a tagging feature, it would open up even more opportunities for Kira and me to categorize users based on interests, and further take advantage of their like-history. However, to some, this may seem like a fair trade off.

Arguably, there is an exchange of value in a situation where user data is collected, and then sold. Assuming that the user enjoys his/her time using the product, in exchange for the emotional value gained from using the platform, Kira and I gain information on the user. Perhaps the privacy breach is not so much in the

actual function of Siren Servers, but rather its covert nature. Many are unaware that their data are used in siren servers, and it is the realization that these operations occur behind the scenes that causes dissatisfaction and disgust. This brings up the possibility of Kira and me using such a system, yet doing it in an overt manner.

Would people respond in a positive way? I would guess most likely not, yet it would shine some light on how many of the services that we use utilize this system.

Alternatively, a system such as this has allowed monetarily free services such as Youtube and Facebook to exist. It comes down the question of how much of one's privacy is one willing to forsake.

Hate Space

In early discussions with my advisor regarding implications of PA, we had to face the potential of our app becoming something that I like to call a "Hate Space," a play on the controversial "Safe Space." While the platform is meant to allow a freedom of speech for art like no other space, sometimes there's a fine line between what an individual would consider hate and a controversial opinion. In fact, this opinion of mine could be considered controversial, as much of the journalism I have seen recently seems to be very binary in opinion: if a majority of people does not agree with a statement, it is deflected as hateful and bigoted to avoid critical thought. This was another reason for constructing PA; it allows individuals to express themselves without having a label stuck to their persona. It seems as though many hesitate to express their contrarian opinion on account of the fear of being labeled, regardless of the validity of their position. Even more so, if the

content on the app is hateful, is there any purpose in removing the content from the page?

Societal Implications

What if PA hypothetically became a major success? Just as Yik-Yak had faced in their allegations of becoming a space that allows bullying, there would be a fair share of controversy regarding the idea of PA becoming a haven for hateful content. Say that PA becomes our so-called Hate Space; are spaces like this okay? The platform would certainly draw some light on the true, underlying nature of individuals, sans trolling. In platforms with a similar concept, such as Yik-Yak, the text-based anonymous posting phone application that has had major success across college campuses, people have called for the removal of the application on the basis of bullying and hateful speech. The simple removal of this application, and hypothetically PA, would not dissipate the hate in society. One could argue that it could make the spread of it more difficult, as the perpetrators would have fewer platforms to broadcast through. Still, as mentioned earlier, sometimes there is a fine line between what many may deem as hate, and what others may find to be a good point. By silencing those who may fall on the side of making a good point, we shut ourselves out to serious discussion. What if the platform becomes more of a safe space?

If PA became a safe space where its anonymous nature is perceived as beneficial, it would become a great resource for viewing art in a different light. This was the original intended purpose of PA: remove whatever stigmas an artist may

have from the artwork, making the artwork its own entity. This environment is the dream of many artists, or at very least is seemingly intriguing to Kira and me. Of course, as we have seen, software design comes with a price.

Closing Remarks

Although our project had not finished, the development of it alone has uncovered many questions that I had not previously considered. It transformed from a project that built a level playing field for artists, to one that looked to change how vulnerability and privacy are handled. Perhaps one day developers can find the happy medium between vulnerability, users' need for validation, and true back end privacy. Still, is this something that individuals in our society care for? Perhaps it is not.

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