

Cyburbia: How search engines are changing us

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Cyburbia: How search engines are changing us by Polis Intern Sally Walkerman is a report on a talk at Polis by James Harkin.



Although James Harkin writes about technological and social trends, *Cyburbia* is actually a sociological book about the history of ideas. He points out that long before people spent a lot of time around Internet technology, there was an idea called ‘cybernetics’. which influenced the development of our current technologies. It’s a useful theory that gets us away from jargon and helps to understand how we wound up here.

Cybernetics developed during World War Two, saying that what is most important about us as humans is our ability to send messages, and to respond to feedback from those messages. The focus now is on how we think about identity.

A Story about data release

In the summer of 2006, Abdur Chaduri working in the U.S decided it might be a good idea to make a bunch of AOL search data available to researchers online. Good data is hard to come by and they would only identify AOL’s users by anonymous numbers. They only made the data public on a small, academic site. This didn’t work: within 2 days of release, the data, 23,000,000 keywords, was mirrored and posted “by activists and hackers”.

For the first time, the public saw anonymous numerical usernames, all the searches, and times. You could trace the thought processes of individual people. It wasn’t long before people began to turn anonymous numerical usernames back into real people. People typing information into search engines share deep thoughts. Harkin tells three search data stories, revealing deeply personal thoughts and concerns.

Processing Information

Is it possible that this rapid information loop between sending out messages into Google and the responding feedback, is changing the way that we want to process and respond to information?

The way people search is prone to rapid twists and turns. It seems to short circuit the decision-making cycle, allowing the user to think with greater agility. The way we dart through information may indicate that we want to read differently. Or, does what we get lack direction, which might ‘spill out onto the rest of our lives?’

Sharing information

What comes out as we search becomes a vast trove of information about us on the Internet. Some (such as Chris Anderson in *The End of Science*) would argue that it does away with the need for social science theory — we have so much data to crunch. When people make these kind of arguments, they do so in direct lineage to Warren McCulloch, who says if you had all this data about us, all connected, then at the center, we might see a sort of global brain, that would tell us all we need to know.

When we look at what Harkin calls ‘Cyburbia’ today it is nowhere near a global brain, though it might look like a vast ‘electronic unconscious, or id’, which tends to short circuit our rational thoughts in favor of half-baked intentions, impulses. So, it can be seen as an interesting gauge of the collective mood. It goes under the radar of conventional polling but is an eerily immediate chronicle of the public mood.

For example, Harkin tells of being at The Googleplex in February 2008, and some programmers were showing him how to use Google trends by comparing how often the keywords Obama and Clinton were searched. At that time,

Clinton was the frontrunner, but keywords indicated a rise in interest for Obama, and a wane in interest about Clinton.

Google is interested in mapping these pieces, to turn to a business advantage. Others are too, like pollsters, financial services, and the State. One could market based on interest, not demographics. Much of the data doesn't make sense, but with lots and lots of data, we can map the relation between bits of information, and meaning comes from beyond the individual pieces.

This is feels ironic, as the Internet has the reputation of burrowing under authority. Yet information winds up on servers, saved forever, often sold to the highest bidder.

Questions

Much of the question and answer period after Harkin's talk focused on the issue of consolidation of power vs. individuality on the Internet. The following questions sum up the discussion:

Q. With the power of these new tools, how do you avoid consolidation of power for the already-powerful? How do you let the potential for the Internet not end up there, but end up with democratic future?

A. Harkin is torn about what we should use the Internet for. Newspapers are going down the tubes and deep data mining could renew their business model by giving them precise information about who we are. That seems ok, but what about governments? In Iran, the Twitterati were happy that people used the micro-blogging platform, but did that information get back to the Iranian Government?

Interesting also is the question of what we're doing as 'little brother'. We don't like being categorized by demographers, but what we do on *Facebook* is cultivating and pigeon-holing who we are, our identities, in perpetuity.

Q: what is the role of the user, do we have any say over how our information is used

Q: what about the tension between wanting to connect with others, vs. services wanting to connect us to companies?

Q: what about privacy policies

A. We do need safeguards, but more, we need a clear idea of the kind of politics that we want. Information is NOT power. Power is power. We have lost our ability to understand how power works, and we should not be seduced by the idea that world is constructed by electronic information. If we stand back from the idea that books, politics, everything is constructed out of bits, then we need something more that tells us how a system like Google's can be *used*. We have lost our real-world political ideology, and replaced with the cybernetic, of everything based on bits. We need to reintroduce culture, politics, and community, independent of technology.

This report on James Harkin's talk at Polis was written by Sally Walkerman

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