

Conflict in My Outlook_ We Met Online Exhibition Essay

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In our COVID-19 present, amid global lock-downs and physical isolation measures, our reliance on the Internet to exist as social beings is acute. Like never before, this hyper-connected moment underscores the slippage between our virtual and actual lives, bound up in a feedback loop of URL<>IRL.¹ This exhibition was devised before the pandemic struck, however its responsive move to an online format makes both material and conceptual sense given that it is an exhibition of, and about, the Internet.

Conflict in My Outlook is a phrase lifted from the ubiquitous software program Microsoft Office. Derived from an error message related to a scheduling clash, it alludes to a glitch or failure to connect to the network. The exhibition title refers to the sense of cognitive dissonance that underpins our relationships with new, networked technologies, and the deeply polarising realities they reproduce in our heavily mediated lives between online and offline, public and private, social connection and division, information and misinformation, privacy and surveillance, human and machine, and so on.

A number of prominent international exhibitions have already explored the impact of the Internet on contemporary art. Some have sought to chronologise the canon of net.art within the spectrum of contemporary art practice; for example, *The Art Happens Here: Net Art's Archival Poetics* (2019), presented at the New Museum, New York, in conjunction with Rhizome, and *I Was Raised on the Internet* (2018), at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and online.² *Conflict in My Outlook* expands on the legacies of these exhibitions in a still emerging field of scholarship. However, it is neither an historical chronology nor a survey of current practice. Rather, it is a response to the recent and dramatically changed socio-political conditions that networked technologies have spawned.

To put this in context: as recently as 2018, a watershed historical moment occurred. The Cambridge Analytica scandal unravelled Facebook's misuse and deployment of the data of over 87 million people to influence the 2016 Brexit Referendum in the UK and Donald Trump's US Presidential election of the same year. Furthermore, social media was weaponised as a tool to spread sophisticated disinformation campaigns to manipulate public opinion. These incidents in particular exposed the Internet as a powerful tool that can be harnessed to undermine ideals of truth and democracy. Over the last decade, the five companies known as FAANG (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google) have secured corporate monopoly over the Internet,

reshaping capitalism as we knew it. Through the development of what is now known as the Data Industrial Complex—a machination that extracts, trades, matches and sells our personal information through our online interactions—the implications of engaging online have irrevocably changed.³

Conflict in My Outlook unpacks these ideas, responding to our historic present through the works of leading national and international artists, and scholars from The University of Queensland and further afield. Through recent work and new commissions, the artists featured have expansive cross-disciplinary practices. Harnessing the materiality of the Internet, they co-opt and remix user-generated content sourced from blogs and social media platforms, design interactive websites and more, to consider our networked, technological age.

Conflict in My Outlook investigates the way the Internet mediates and shapes social relations and ideas, revealing the erosion of boundaries between online and offline, public and private. It foregrounds the Internet as a source of both human connection and societal division, illuminating the precarious nature of reality in an era of fake news, post-truth politics, and echo chambers of disinformation. Departing from the utopian impulse of early Internet culture to its current dystopian realities, the exhibition explores the power imbalance embedded into our everyday, where networked technologies are used as apparatuses of surveillance and control. It asks: what will become of privacy and democracy in the context of the new economic logic of data capitalism?

Conceived through a series of intersecting ‘chapters’, artworks and commissioned textual provocations, the exhibition’s online and physical iterations (the latter commencing in 2021) have been grouped under four themes: *Utopia to Dystopia – Failed Metaphors and Invisible Power Structures*; *Digital Intimacies – The Public Private*; *Disinformation Architects – Fake News and the Weaponisation of Social Media*; and *All Data to the People – Surveillance in the Age of the Big Other*.

UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA – FAILED METAPHORS AND INVISIBLE POWER STRUCTURES

Artists have always responded to socio-political conditions as a way of making sense of the world, and these are inextricably bound up with evolving technologies. In the late 1990s, the work of early net.artists was characterised by experimentation and utopian aspirations. Harnessing the materiality of the Internet and its networked nature as a medium, artists embraced interactive, collaborative production processes that brought people together and blurred the definitions between artist and audience. Communication was privileged over aesthetics and representation, appropriation over authorship and copyright, and ephemerality over permanent art

objects. Subverting the museum as a gatekeeper of cultural content, the Internet became both a means of production and a medium through which to publish and distribute, promote and engage, consume and critique.⁴

The Internet was initially understood as an egalitarian space, a flattened democratic platform where freedom of speech was only enhanced by networked, open distribution channels. American poet and activist John Perry Barlow summarised these utopian sentiments in 1996 with his text *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*.⁵ Barlow's manifesto describes a speculative future pertaining to an anarchistic, idealised notion of cyberspace, a borderless territory open to all, free from governmental laws and structures. Rhizomatic in form, the World Wide Web was perceived as an organism that unfolded multi-directionally through the input of collective voices. As early chatrooms and online forums gained mainstream popularity, it appeared as if technological evolution could enable anyone (with an Internet connection) to broadcast their ideas and find not just an audience, but a community of like-minded people.

The utopian possibilities enabled by global connectivity were harnessed by activists to raise awareness and galvanise action against social injustices. Protest strategies from the street were rethought and deployed online, taking forms such as 'email bombs' and 'virtual sit ins'. When coordinated en masse, these efforts resulted in the overloaded servers and crashed websites of corporate infrastructures. An early example of this is *FloodNet* (1998), a collaboration between net.artists Electronic Disturbance Theatre and the Zapatistas (a left-wing Mexican revolutionary group). Taking the form of a conceptual artwork that doubled as a tool for electronic civil disobedience, *FloodNet* was a targeted cyber-attack that used a Java applet, enabling users to send a deluge of requests that jammed the infrastructures of the US Department of Defense, Mexico's then-President Ernesto Zedillo and others.⁶

While many of the earlier utopian values ascribed to the Internet have since lost their sheen, various platforms continue to be used to democratic and activist ends. More recently, with the Black Lives Matter movement, social networking platforms such as Instagram have played an instrumental role in recording police violence, as well as being used as tools for communicating, mobilising, fundraising and demonstrating allyship (some of it useful, some of it performative virtue signalling).⁷ Hashtag activism has also been harnessed as a means to propagate and grow decentralised networks of dissent, nurturing political movements such as Black Lives Matter both online and off. Other examples such as #MeToo—a movement against sexual harassment—and the emergence of 'call out culture', evidence the power of social media to enact real-world political change.

As described above, the utopianism that characterised facets of early Internet culture has since evaporated. The five FAANG corporations listed above, which have dominated the Internet over the past decade, have completely reshaped global capitalism and democracy while permeating every aspect of our lives.⁸ From how we connect and communicate with each other to how we conduct work, source entertainment, find love or sex, shop or vote, we are inextricably bound up with digital devices and the mystifying term known as networked 'Cloud' technologies.

Simply put, Cloud computing is a means of storing and accessing data and programs over the Internet instead of through a hard drive. Writer, artist and technologist James Bridle has written extensively about the failed metaphor of the Cloud as a fiction that muddies and mystifies the Data Industrial Complex. Thinking about the Internet in this way endows it with an ethereal quality, in opposition to the bricks-and-mortar data centres, omnipresent satellites and fibre-optic cables that use immense resources and generate vast carbon footprints.⁹ For Bridle, invisible power structures are not only the most threatening but are also the most impervious to socio-political critique. Many server farms are remotely situated out of sight in offshore locations due to lower operational costs and more relaxed laws around data privacy and sovereignty. The subterranean fibre-optic cables that run across the ocean floor follow the same terrain as early telegraph lines—from colonised territories to economic centres of power such as the UK and the US—reinscribing imperialism through the Internet as a neo-colonial force.¹⁰

DIGITAL INTIMACIES – THE PUBLIC PRIVATE

While the power dynamics bound up in the Internet have irreversibly shifted, the fact that the Internet has made us more connected remains indisputable. In the context of the current global pandemic, where there are mass border closures, enforced quarantines and social distancing, our social interactions have been increasingly mediated by technology. For many, platforms such as Zoom or Facetime have been a lifeline for virtual human contact, while news feeds and social media have simultaneously contributed to a sense of existential dread. Notions and expressions of intimacy have also moved into the virtual domain. With the emergence of online dating and hook-up-culture apps such as OkCupid, Tinder and Grindr, our romantic and sexual encounters are increasingly mediated by computers and influenced by algorithms.

The rise in social media platforms has been invaluable for communities that identify within the spectrum of LGBTQIA+, enhancing visibility outside of mainstream heteronormative culture. Platforms such as Instagram, Reddit and TikTok have empowered marginalised identities, enabling geographically disparate groups with

specific interests to come together online. Making reference to groups on Reddit known as Subreddits, Brady Robards coined the term 'digitally mediated neo-tribes', describing this diversity of communities as replete with their own rituals and codes of behaviour.¹¹ The anonymity that the Internet can engender has also contributed to a sense that identity and representation are malleable and performative, enabling users to completely reinvent themselves online. While there is still much work to be done, these aspects have catalysed a cultural shift with increased awareness around queer, trans and gender-non-binary issues and politics.

No corporation has profited off the narrative of the Internet as a unifying force more than the social networking site Facebook. Launched in 2004 with the corporate missive of 'making the world more open and connected', Facebook has achieved unprecedented global penetration. With a subscription base of 2.23 billion users, Facebook is the most visited site online.¹²

However, and perhaps without much consideration, many of us have given over our privacy and personal information in the spirit of connection and convenience, leaving in our wake a data trail of 'likes', status updates, photographs, geolocation tags and social networks. Our most intimate thoughts, desires and predilections have been broadcast into the ether. And the ether reflects back, endowing us with a sense of ourselves, and rewarding us with personalised algorithms.

DISINFORMATION ARCHITECTS – FAKE NEWS AND THE WEAPONISATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Embedded within these social media platforms is a new kind of economic exploitation that harvests our data (and our free labour) and outsources it to third parties. With the rise of the FAANG multinational companies, data is mined and weaponised as a means of generating targeted marketing, but, more insidiously, of shaping our very behaviour—the way we think, vote and act.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 unravelled Facebook's misuse and deployment of the data of over 87 million people to influence the 2016 Brexit Referendum in the UK and Donald Trump's US Presidential election of that year.¹³ Through data mining and analysis, portraits of the population were created and transmuted into psychological profiling used to predict and influence voter behaviour. This was further exacerbated by sophisticated disinformation campaigns such as industrially scaled troll farms to shape public opinion. It appeared that the platforms that were created to connect us were in fact weaponised against us.

In Michiko Kakutani's recent text *The Death of Truth*, the writer describes the political motivations of Russian troll farms as having a clear agenda to undermine democracy and reinforce the ideological chasms in American society by working to get Trump elected. According to Kakutani, organisations such as the Internet Research Agency, based in St Petersburg, engage in activities such as setting up fake social media accounts to impersonate grassroots groups and create dissensus. Examples include an imposter Facebook account called 'Heart of Texas' to proliferate racist hate speech and protest against the Islamic community, as well as a counter group called 'United Muslims of America'.¹⁴

Online, we each operate in our own information universe. Social media connects like-minded users, supplying customised news feeds and reinforcing our existing preconceptions about the world, potentially narrowing our individual silos even further. Rebounding off these echo chambers, algorithms perpetuate news that is popular or trending, rather than accurate or significant, such as sensational content or hate speech. In this way, algorithms are geared towards driving clicks and engagement with the end goal of advertising sales, personalised for our feeds in accordance with prior data that has been harvested.¹⁵ The computer monitor is a one-way mirror that reflects back our own interests while an algorithm observes what we click. Once, we searched Google; now, Google searches us.¹⁶

The information superhighway that many assumed would lead to increased knowledge and connectivity has also led to social dissensus. The tendency towards optimising antagonistic content that is embedded into the Internet has contributed to the rise of nationalism, fundamentalism and the alt-right. Rather than being a neutral objective technological tool, the Internet sustains and nourishes uneven power relations that contribute to an increasingly fractured society.¹⁷

ALL DATA TO THE PEOPLE – SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND THE BIG OTHER

According to Harvard Business emerita Shoshana Zuboff, we have entered into a new age of 'surveillance capitalism', a state that has transformed capitalism, threatening democracy as we know it. Characterised by the corporate dominance of FAANG, Zuboff notes that while these corporations were developing their business models, they embedded the ability to track, monitor and match the activities of their users and turn that data into money. Zuboff describes these activities as a new economic order that extracts the raw data of human experience for sales, and the prediction and modification of human behaviour.¹⁸ Every time we 'like' a post on Facebook, send an email via Gmail, download a movie on Netflix, plan a trip with Google Maps, catch an Uber, or order pizza with Deliveroo, our data is being harvested. The Orwellian notion of Big Brother in the iconic text *1984* (1949) has

evolved into the 'Big Other', meaning the omnipresent power that observes the minutiae of our lives.¹⁹ In exchange for enhanced convenience, intimacy and social connection, we give away our privacy, undertaking the free labour of being watched. This has become known as the Data Industrial Complex, with data about individuals described as the new oil.²⁰

However, data harvesting is not exclusively confined to the Internet. All networked things or smart objects leave a digital exhaust of personal information in their wake. Data is extracted as a raw material from five key sources: economic transactions; sensors located in bodies; things and places (known as The Internet of Things, IoT, or smart technologies); corporate and government databases; and public and private surveillance companies.²¹ This information is supplemented by social media such as Facebook and our Google searches,²² our scraps of data assembled, synthesised, traded and sold.²³

While data mining draws on human experience as a means to predict and shape user behaviour, other primary outcomes include machine learning initiatives. Data informs (and is informed by) Artificial Intelligence technologies such as smart cars and houses, smart home assistants (such as Apple's Siri or Google's Alexa), chatbots (software programs that interact with humans online) and facial recognition technologies. Machine learning is now at the forefront of Google's corporate strategy along with other tech giants. In 2006, Google purchased YouTube, acquiring and cataloguing an audio ontology of all the sounds on the Internet as a giant pool of data. With the potential to be weaponised in many divergent and insidious ways—such as pre-emptive policing—such examples raise questions around our rights to our own data, the ethics of listening, and the politics of programming future technologies with pre-existing biases.

The techno-politics surrounding drones as networked devices are also complex and problematic. Internet-enabled sensors are used to augment the surveillance, tracking and assassination of designated military targets. Drones employ the same pattern recognition technologies that suggest 'friends' on Facebook, the same algorithms that produce recommendations on Netflix, the same satellites and geolocation technologies that signal our nearest Uber. The networked technologies that enable increased customer satisfaction and convenience—the Trojan horse of personalisation—also inform and advance the latest evolutions in un-manned aerial warfare.

From its utopian origins to the dystopian realities of our current cultural context, the emergence of the Internet has profoundly and irrevocably altered the course of human history. The seamless integration of our online and offline lives has

connected people across geographic borders, resulting in a vast proliferation of communities, identities and sexualities. At the same time, algorithm-driven communications have exacerbated social division, stoking the fires of nationalism, fundamentalism and the rise of the alt-right. Through surveillance capitalism, the impacts of the data industrial complex are all pervasive—shaping the very way we think, act and vote.

In the early 2000s, Google’s corporate motto was *Don’t be Evil*. In around 2015, after a corporate restructure, this sentiment was quietly removed, relegated to a footnote in Internet history. At this juncture in time, in the eye of the storm that is the global COVID-19 pandemic, we might be wise to consider the present state of technopolitics, and the questions that artists and others are asking. In our networked present, in the age of the Data Industrial Complex, what are the implications for our privacy? For the future of democracy and state control? Is it too late to just ‘disappear’?²⁴ Is there an alternative network?

¹ URL or Uniform Resource Locator is the colloquial term for a website address. IRL is an abbreviation for the phrase ‘in real life’ that evolved through the language used in early online forums and Internet chatrooms.

² *The Art Happens Here: Net Art’s Archival Poetics* (2019) focussed on the preservation and contextualisation of 100 most exemplary net.art works from 1980 to 2010. *I Was Raised on the Internet* (2018) featured post-Internet art (art made after and informed by the advent of the Internet). The project and its associated publication charted the impact of the Internet on the way we experience the world through artworks produced from 1998 to 2018.

³ Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, coined the term ‘Data Industrial Complex’, likening it to the Military Industrial Complex in his keynote speech at the annual International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners in Brussels, 2018.

⁴ Natalie Bookchin, Alexei Shulgin, “Introduction to net.art, (March–April 1999),” in *Art and the Internet*, ed. Phoebe Adler, Leanne Haynan, Arrate Hidalgo, Dana Saey, Phoebe Stubbs and Nick Warner (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013), 203.

⁵ John Perry Barlow (1947–2018) was a poet and Internet philosopher, and cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an organisation that interrogated civil liberties related to the Internet. For more information, see <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

⁶ Aria Dean, “Tactical Poetics: FloodNet’s Virtual Sit-ins,” in *The Art Happens Here, Net Art Anthology*, ed. Michael Conner and Aria Dean (New York: Rhizome, 2019), 97.

⁷ Rhizome released digital resources for using networked tools to combat police violence:

<https://rhizome.org/editorial/2020/jun/03/digital-resources-for-a-movement-against-police-violence/>.

⁸ Julianne Schultz, “Move Very Fast and Break Many Things: Digital Gangsters and the Big Other,” *Griffith Review* 64, *The New Disrupters*, ed. Ashley Hay (Queensland: Griffith University, 2019), 12.

⁹ James Bridle, *New Dark Age, Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018), 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹¹ Brady Robards, “Belonging and Neo-Tribalism on Social Media Site Reddit,” in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, ed. A. Hardy, A. Bennett, & B. Robards (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 190

¹² Facebook’s corporate motto has most recently been updated to: “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together”.

¹³ Schultz, “Move Very Fast and Break Many Things,” 14.

¹⁴ Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (London: William Collins, 2018), 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶ Shoshana Zuboff explores this notion further in her article <https://mondediplo.com/2019/01/06google>.

¹⁷ Bridle, *New Dark Age*, 246.

¹⁸ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Great Britain: Profile Books, 2019); see, in particular, the introductory definition section.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 376.

²⁰ Mark Burdon and Mark Andrejevic, "Big Data in the Sensor Society," in *Big Data Is Not a Monolith*, ed. Cassidy R. Sugimoto, Hamid R. Ekbia, and Michael Mattioli (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 61.

²¹ Schultz, "Move Very Fast and Break Many Things," 17.

²² Mark Andrejevic, "The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure," in *Critical Studies in Media Communications*, 19, no. 2 (June 2002): 238.

²³ Tim Cook, CEO of Apple describing data collection in his keynote speech at the annual International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners in Brussels, 2018.

²⁴ Artist Hito Steyerl explores the politics and aesthetics of how to opt out from Internet visibility in her still pertinent historical work *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File*, 2013.