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The Digital Puppetmaster

Ryan Sung
Claremont McKenna College

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Claremont McKenna College

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submitted to
Professor Mark Andrejevic
and
Professor James Morrison

by
Ryan Sung

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Foreword

In the Spring of my junior year at Claremont McKenna College, I took a class at Pomona College called “Drone Theory.” Professor Mark Andrejevic was the professor of this class and would later become the primary advisor for this thesis. In Drone Theory, we took the specific examples of recreational and military drones and broadened their implications to the general topic of persistent surveillance and data collection of technology and society. My entire life, I was always drawn to technology and have had a strong affinity for it. I always saw technology from a different perspective than those around me. While friends would strategize their social media posts and discuss which pictures were the best to upload, I would always be fascinated by the system in which teenagers would devote so much time and effort and its implications on a larger scale. “Drone Theory” was the class I never expected to spark my interest in the topic, answer the questions I always had, and give me the critical means of continuing the conversation.

The purpose of “The Digital Puppetmaster” is simply to provide a means of awareness and a suggestion of mindset for members of the digital age. The digital medium has come to define society and establish its existence as an increasingly omnipresent one. Fundamentally, the digital medium is a sandbox for creating worlds that transcend the limitations of real life. Given the unlimited potential of the digital medium, it becomes apparent that it is easy to show what people want to see and hide what they do not. I aim to bring to light and uncover the realities of the digital medium and how the larger powers that control it take advantage of society. Society at large perpetuates a dangerous mentality of blindly trusting technology and believing that it has their best

intentions in mind. I make the case that the ones who control the digital world are the ones who created ground zero for this way of thinking.

The digital medium is the embodiment of the Digital Revolution in which analog technologies of the past reformatted themselves to exist in digital forms. For those of us living in 2018, our smartphones, laptops, tablets, among other devices are all gateways into the digital medium; the digital identities that we create on various social media platforms are the intangible anchors that prevent us from leaving. The nonphysical existence of the digital medium is not bound by the limitations of physics, which allows for the unlimited potential that it has already shown to rapidly take advantage of, especially in the past twenty years. Because of the exponential growth of the medium and the multi-directional interactions people and the medium have, there are a number of conversations that have moved to the forefront of [ironically] digital spaces.

In this paper, I plan to explore four major topics surrounding the digital medium. First, in “Interactivity as a Form of Control”, I plan to discuss the fundamental interactions found in the digital sphere and how interactivity actually exists as a form of control. The interactions that exist in the medium allow for power dynamics to manifest themselves, visible or not. Second, “The Illusion of Freedom” is a narrative regarding the digital identities that the majority of us possess. We are led to believe that our social media accounts and digital avatars are our own and that we hold autonomy over what, how, and when we post and digest content; however, I plan to explore how the reality is not such and why it is naive to believe so. Third, “Data Archives and Persistent Surveillance” discusses the mentality that society has gleefully adopted: that our digital information is safe and our own. However, this mentality reflects the age old saying of

‘ignorance is bliss’; our information is not safe nor just our own anymore. The final topic I aim to discuss is “The Democratization of Technical Tools and the Rise of Interfaces”, in which I talk about how the increased use and influence of interfaces as tools that blur the previously needed steps and our obsession with efficiency. These are the four main topics I plan to address and explore tied together by the influence of the digital medium. The means by which I plan to explore my topics and arguments is by various authors and their arguments, as well as my responses to said arguments and contextualizing them in modern day case-studies.

If you search “Digital Revolution” in Google, the first suggested result is a Wikipedia page providing a brief history and background to the unprecedented movement. There’s an argument discussed about when exactly the “Digital Revolution” began; some the 1950s and others the 1970s. While arguments about the shift from analog to digital technologies can be made about those eras, the primary focus of the narrative discussed in this paper will be in the context of the recent wave of the technological revolution of the twenty-first century. As a twenty-one-year-old millennial with a love for technology, there is a strong personal interest that I draw from the topic of this paper. That being said, there are a number of acknowledgements that need to be made before I continue. Firstly, as a millennial, I recognize there is a strong bias I hold as someone who directly interacts with technology to the point that much of my life is dependent on it and the digital medium. While my points may come from my voice, I strive to present all information and arguments in an objective manner. Additionally, to explore the space that is the digital medium is an extremely ambitious task. As much information and arguments, I present, I recognize the endless layers to the medium in

which some may prove my argument invalid; however, the limitless nature of the medium also supports my arguments in providing unlimited means of hiding information.

After reading through this thesis, I hope the reader will walk away with a realization and better understanding of the true nature of the digital medium. It would be overly ambitious to believe that awareness and education of the reality of the medium would, in turn, lead to changes in the fundamental technological behaviors users carry out. I hope to empower my readers with the power to choose the digital life they want to lead through education and awareness. Speaking from personal experience, I have been able to live the digital life that I chose and find myself better able to navigate the often-overwhelming space that is the digital medium.

I. Interactivity as a Form of Control

The goal of this chapter is to explore and discuss the fundamental interactions found in the digital sphere and how interactivity exists as a form of control. The interactions of the medium allow for power dynamics to manifest themselves, visible or not to the public. When I use the word “interactivity,” I use it in the context of the connections that various players in the metaphorical game of the digital medium have with each other and how control deceptively reveals itself in said interactions. “Interactivity,” as I define now and use throughout the rest of this chapter, describes the relationships found between and among the members of the digital medium.

Metaphorically speaking, the digital medium is like a video game and within the game, there are several different types of players. There are consumers, the ones who consume the content and interact with one another within the medium and travel through the various parts of the digital space. There are producers, the ones that actually create the content to be engaged with, whether it be the producers that take a picture of their cat on a whim and upload it to Instagram to the ones that spend months on a video project and upload it to their YouTube channel. More often than not, consumers are producers, but all producers are consumers. From this point on, it will be easier to refer to the both of them as collective “users.” Users also belong and contribute to the digital consumer culture and the obsession with media and product consumption. The other relevant player in the game is the brand. The title “brand” is used to describe the companies, firms, and structures that create and control the digital spaces that users interact within.

In addition to the various types of users, there are three fundamental forms of interactivity to address. User-user interactivity, user-platform interactivity, and platform-medium interactivity. User-user interactivity is defined as how the individuals of society use the digital medium as a mode to interact with one another in a manner that eliminates the barrier of physical distance. User-platform interactivity describes how social media spaces are the platforms and modes by which people can interact on the digital network. Platform-medium interactivity is centered around the idea that while individual users directly interact with the platforms, the conglomerates of brands interact with the medium itself and figure out ways to take further advantage of it to play in their favor.

In this chapter, I argue the case that the framework of society, or more specifically our digitally-driven society, is dictated by the different forms of interactivity manifesting themselves as disparaging power dynamics. Brands and larger powers perpetuate the idea that they no longer dictate the market and that now the users and customers are the ones in power. However, this narrative of consumers having more choice and control than ever before is part of the false sense of security that brands want users to believe. By doing so, brands can deceive its consumers on the premise that they, for the first time, possess autonomy over their own decisions and that brands now exist to accommodate to the consumers' needs and desires.

It is easy to believe and claim that we, individually, are not subject to this control that brands exercise and that we know better. However, the reality is that very few are free from this control. If you find yourself scrolling through Instagram or Facebook during your off-time, searching Google for the best coffee shop in the area, or if you simply walk out into the real world that is laced with advanced technology everywhere,

you are exposing yourself to forms of control via the digital medium. No one is safe. I will prove my case in this chapter through the modern-day case studies of YouTube, Casey Neistat, and Samsung.

The user-to-user interactivity on the digital medium exists through user-brand interactivity, particularly shown in the case study of YouTube. YouTube is a great example to refer to as a manifestation of brands using a digital platform as a means of exercising control. The video-sharing site not only generates a ridiculous amount of money but also provides a space in which people consume marketable, user-generated content that brands are seen to capitalize on. YouTube is arguably the largest video-sharing website in the world, having over 400 hours of content uploaded per minute to the platform and over a billion hours of content watched by users per day, which in turn generates billions of dollars of advertising profit (Moya, “PaperKup”). Fundamentally, two different types of users exist on the platform: consumers and creators. Consumers are the individuals that consume the media itself and watch videos on the platform. Creators are the ones that produce and upload the videos that consumers interact with. The roles are also interchangeable; creators are often also consumers and consumers can also be creators. Both consumers and creators, however, are in the same position of being undeniably controlled by the digital space in which they exist, in this case, YouTube.

Before I go deeper into the analysis of YouTube, it is important to acknowledge several things. Firstly, Alphabet, the parent company that owns both Google and YouTube, is one of the “Four Horsemen of Big Tech,” with the other three being Apple, Amazon, and Facebook. Being as influential in the tech world as it is, Alphabet has been accused of skewing Google’s autocomplete feature in the search engine and algorithm

used to produce the search results. More recently, this was found in the case of the algorithm supposedly altering search results to suppress incriminating content and articles regarding Hillary Clinton's alleged criminal activity (Solon and Levin, "How Google's search algorithm spreads false information with a rightwing bias"). Alphabet is the epitome of a framework on a broader scope and brand that exercises a disturbing amount of power and potential to control users on the digital medium. Not only does it have its fingers in all the pies of widespread use of hardware and software, but it also owns Google, by far the single most-used search engine in America, and YouTube, the largest user-generated video content platform in America. Borja Moya is the creator of PaperKup, a website that publishes articles advising advertisers and marketers on how to navigate the space that is YouTube, and discusses how "YouTube is one of the most important sites on the Internet. It influences our society and education, impacting one billion users – a third of the Internet" (Moya, "PaperKup"). What Moya says about the platform is not only true but also surprisingly well-known and discussed among those involved in the community. What I find particularly interesting is that Moya is marketer himself, whose career depends on brands seeking advice from him about optimal marketing strategies on the platform. Despite this, he goes on to say that "YouTube now reaches more people than any TV network, making YouTube the next target for marketers to corrupt and to destroy" (Moya, "PaperKup"). Notice the language Moya uses; neither "corrupt" nor "destroy" have the most positive ring to them. Even someone whose career depends on marketing on the platform acknowledges the deceptive potential the platform holds [and exercises] when marketers and brands are involved in the equation.

To further the discussion, it is important to address the framework in which these power dynamics can manifest. Gilles Deleuze in his “Postscript on Societies of Control,” centers his discussion around what he calls “molds” and “modulations.” Stating definitions, Deleuze says, “Enclosures are molds, distinct castings” and “Controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (Deleuze 4). Unlike modes, which are structured and niched frameworks fit for specific circumstances, modulations will adapt and evolve according to the shifts and changes of society, while maintaining the same impact and influence; the control over users in the digital medium is flexible and adaptive as a modulation. Modulations, as Deleuze describes them, define societies of control and embody exactly the form of control seen in the user-brand interactivity. Deleuze claims that the effect that modulations have in society perpetuate a diffusion of responsibility. The modulation of technology seemingly gives everyone the power to do whatever we want, whenever we want; however, beyond the surface, this shift simply diffuses a “responsibility” throughout our lives. What used to be times set aside specifically to accomplish different tasks is now dependent on all of our time in its entirety. Deleuze argues that in a society of modulations, one thing, a single responsibility, comes to exist in all aspects of our lives. He solidifies this idea in his discussion of identity. Firstly, Deleuze makes it a point to address that in societies of control, “one is never finished with anything,” attributing the various parts of our lives blurring together as a “universal system of deformation” (Deleuze 5). Let us define “free time” as time completely free of the confines of any structures of power; free time is full autonomy over what you want to do and when you want to do. Deleuze argues that the

concept of free time no longer exists in societies of control. Social media, video platforms, basically any sort of media consumption on the digital medium is a modulation that robs society of its true free time. Looking at our own free time, it is not uncommon for us to pull out our phones, open the YouTube application, and spend hours watching videos on our favorite channels or on the trending page. While we may refer to watching trending cat videos as done in our free time, this fundamentally is not truly free time, as shown in the previous discussion of YouTube. While we may believe that entertainment through videos is our choice, the fundamental interactivity is that by doing so, we are contributing to YouTube's goal of having users interact with their platforms and be continuously exposed to the open and hidden advertisements permeated throughout the platform. YouTube provides the digital experience that provides users with the content in the most digestible, yet addictive manner, appealing to the digital consumer culture of society today. As already discussed, the manner in which the majority of us interact with media, in actuality, is the behavior perpetuated by the platforms themselves.

Further along the discussion of societies of control and modulations, Deleuze claims that "Individuals have become 'dividuals'" (Deleuze 5). In the context of the digital medium and its platforms, consumer culture robs the individuality of its members. It becomes too easy for users to fall into the cracks of the infinitely large existence of the medium of modulations, which is why users often lose the singular defining characteristic of "individuality" and helplessly merge into the mass of consumer culture. This point addresses another aspect of interactivity; the overwhelming scale and size of the digital medium create a truly unique dynamic of interactivity. Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen,

two Google executives who co-wrote “The New Digital Age: Transforming Nations, Businesses, and Our Lives” continue the conversation,

“What began as a means of electronic information transmission... has transformed into an omnipresent and endlessly multifaceted outlet for human energy and expression [where] hundreds of millions of people are... creating and consuming an untold amount of digital content in an online world that is not truly bound by terrestrial laws. This new capacity for free expression and free movement of information has generated the rich virtual landscape we know today” (Schmidt, Cohen 3)

Because the digital space is not bound by the laws of physics, the nature of its expansion follows an exponential growth rate, yet never tapers off at the constant K; in other words, it has no limit. “Mass adoption of the Internet is driving one of the most exciting social, cultural and political transformations in history, and unlike earlier periods of change, this time the effects are fully global” (4). “Postscript on Societies of Control” was written in 1992, and twenty-five years later, we are living in the peak of this global transformation that is driven by technology. We should recognize that fundamentally “how we interact with other and how we view ourselves will continue to be influenced and driven by the online world around us” (Deleuze 5). Here we take a step back in the analysis of interactivity. Deleuze brought up these points twenty-five years ago, and for twenty-five years, the progress of society has been affirming his proposed ideologies and is on the path to continue to do so.

However, not all participants in the digital revolution fall appropriately into such “dividualization,” as Deleuze claims. If a creator has gained a large and influential

enough following, they can arguably be considered a digital influencer. In this case, we continue to look specifically at the platform of YouTube. A digital influencer is essentially someone whose opinions and actions have the power to sway those of their social following on various platforms. No longer everyday users, these creators exercise power and influence on a mass scale, which is why it can be argued that they have graduated from Deleuze's "dividualization." A specific example of how user-brand interactivity controls user-user interactivity is seen in the partnership between Casey Neistat and Samsung. Casey Neistat, sitting at a whopping eight million subscribers on YouTube, is one of the biggest creators and digital influencers on YouTube's platform with a dedicated following. In his early days as a creator, Neistat expressed in several of his videos that he loved the Samsung phone that he owned. A combination of most of his videos averaging at least two million views each and Samsung's interest in promoting their new products led to the technology giant contacting Neistat and establishing a contracted partnership. In exchange for being sent new products for free, invited to exclusive events, and paid as a freelance promoter by Samsung, Neistat would publicly and explicitly promote their devices and the brand in general to his extensive following. Regarding actual financial compensation, many digital influencers are given stock options and shares of the company rather than a set price to be paid; this way, the financial success of the promoted brand would also benefit the creator promoting it. While this may seem like a huge break for Neistat that comes with some perks and benefits, the reality of the partnership is that Samsung is putting in a marginal investment into this YouTube creator for an immensely large financial return. Rather than investing much larger sums of money in hiring an advertising agency to promote their brand,

Samsung uses Neistat as a means of taking advantage of recommendation-based marketing. A Forbes article written by Kimberly Whitler states that “92% of consumers believe recommendations from friends and family over all forms of advertising” (Whitler, “Why Word of Mouth Marketing is the Most Important Social Media”), which is exactly what is seen in Neistat’s case.

There is a specific project done by Neistat and Samsung that is particularly fascinating. The two teamed up for a commercial that ran during this year’s Oscars in which Neistat is standing in front of a camera to deliver an inspiring sixty-second monologue. For that minute, he talks about “the rest of us,” (Coffee, “Casey Neistat Introduces Hollywood to the New Makers in Samsung’s Oscars Campaign”) being the run-and-gun creators that shoot videos on our phones and handheld GoPros, as representative of the new wave of Internet media. What I find interesting about this project specifically is how layered and brilliant it is. Samsung is the embodiment of a big-name brand that exercises control over the user-user interactivity by creating smartphones that provide the digital interactions and connections that users need. Not only do they do that and use Neistat as a means of widespread influence, but they also use a very smart and persuasive narrative. Neistat tells as an emotionally-moving proclamation that Samsung is the brand that represents the Internet and social media creators, feigning the identity of a brand that is made for and empowers the everyday digital user. Samsung uses an influential face like Casey Neistat to build trust and a stronger connection between the brand and the consumer. This is the user-brand interactivity previously discussed at its finest, presented on the surface in the most appealing way possible, but layered with forms of control below.

On October 1st of this year, the deadliest mass shooting in US history transpired in Las Vegas, Nevada. The day after, Casey Neistat uploaded a four-and-a-half-minute video addressing the attack. He announces a GoFundMe initiative he started to help those affected and stated how all of the AdSense income generated from that video would be directly donated to the same cause (Neistat, “LET’S HELP THE VICTIMS OF THE LAS VEGAS ATTACK”). Several days after the video went live on YouTube, Neistat noticed that the video had been demonetized and immediately took to Twitter to publicly call out YouTube. YouTube responded with a simple, “We [love] what you’re doing to help, but no matter the intent, our policy is to not run ads on videos about tragedies.” While many were still upset given the fact that Neistat stated that he would be donating that money to the cause, YouTube was seemingly steadfast in their Community Guidelines.

“Seemingly” is the key word here. Several hours after this public exchange, fellow YouTube creator and digital influencer, Philip DeFranco took to Twitter with evidence of a Chevrolet advertisement playing before a Jimmy Kimmel Live video where Kimmel gives an emotional address of the tragedy in Las Vegas, meaning that the channel was profiting via AdSense on a video about a tragedy. Widespread digital outrage ensued. YouTube’s inbox was flooded with people outraged over its hypocritical actions and claims. DeFranco theorized that while YouTube is not lying about its policy to not run ads on tragedies, there are advertising/monetization teams for large shows like Jimmy Kimmel Live on television networks that have YouTube channels that override YouTube’s community guidelines (DeFranco, “Dear YouTube... We Need To Talk. This Is Stupid and Ridiculous”). Days later, YouTube releases information affirming exactly what Philip DeFranco had speculated. YouTube is notorious for having poor

communication with its creators and community when it either does not want to or does not have a good answer; this behavior is especially convenient when it comes to saving face in situations like this one.

Adam Arvidsson and his “Logic of the Brand” fit into the narrative surrounding YouTube, as Arvidsson contextualizes the idea of interactivity manifesting as a form of control very well. He defines what he talks about as the “logic of the brand” as building “on including and managing such free sociality, channeling it into pre-structured platforms where it can unfold in controllable and measurable ways” (Arvidsson 25). Here the “brand” that Arvidsson talks about is the same thing as the structures and groups of individuals belonging to the same entity that control the spaces in which we interact, identical to the “brand” player defined earlier. It is interesting to see him point out and isolate the word “controllable” as a direct product of the brand's purpose. The “free sociality” is the way we interact with one another and the intent of the brand is to seize said sociality and channel it into creating platforms in which sociality exists as still belonging to the user; however, not without having increased jurisdiction in “controllable and measurable ways” (Arvidsson 25). Arvidsson establishes his stance from the get-go regarding the topic and establishes a clear relationship of interactivity he intends to explore: there is one side that controls and another that is controlled. This relationship is much like the one that is seen on YouTube, brands, and influencers. He goes on to explain that “the mass intellectuality of technology-enhanced social interaction- as their main source of value, brands embody the emerging logic of informational capital” (Arvidsson 25). Brands are heavily dependent on the social interactivity that they have capitalized on, as without individuals existing on the platform and digitally engaging with

each other, or in other words user-to-user interactivity, the brand's platforms have no productive reason for existence. YouTube is the epitome of such a brand that relies on the interactivity of its users watching videos created by other users. As long as the user-to-user interactivity exists, the brand-user interactivity can feed off of it and thrive as well. Brands, according to Arvidsson, hide behind the guise of providing that interactivity that users are led to believe they need; however, that interactivity, in reality, is a manifestation of how brands exercise control in the form of interactivity.

The digital medium is massive, so massive that it feels like there is an infinite number of micro-universes, in which people create their worlds. Arvidsson explains how “the new, more diversified media environment made a wider range of information and knowledge available, and actively catered to an experimenting, interactive attitude” (Arvidsson 13). Promoting the “experimenting attitude” is what led brands to realize the potential of interactivity on the digital medium and how interactivity can continue to create new means of benefits for the brand. This interactivity creates the illusion that we are using the internet in the way that we want, but in reality, companies are capitalizing on the fact that we think we are in control. The unlimited number of variations of the digital medium not only allow for the brand to have an unlimited number of areas to capitalize on but also an unlimited number of tries in a trial and error process to determine which methods and models are the most effective. It is also interesting how the nature of a more diversified digital medium can perpetuate a sense of diffusion of responsibility; the seemingly endless diversity of the medium makes it harder to see the effects that these forms of media have when there are so many options for consumers to interact with. The cause and effects of one are lost in the sea of others, contributing to the

unlimited number of do-overs the brand has. To segue the narrative between Arvidsson's arguments to my responses, he states that "the key to attracting fabulous sums of investment (like the \$1.65 billion paid by Google for the online video portal YouTube) is to generate a platform where users willingly interact, network or produce some form of marketable content" (Arvidsson 7). What Arvidsson describes here is the direct application of what is seen in the digital medium as the influence creators have on their digital network. Even more effectively, digital influencers are an extreme user example of creators that impact the decisions of populations of other users. A digital influencer is an individual on the digital medium that has generated enough social capital and numerically speaking, a large following of users that interact with their online personality and content. Often, brands will reach out to these individuals, offering free products or perks in return for promoting their products and services to their network of influence. To their fans and brands, digital influencers are popular, trustworthy voices; though upon a closer look, digital influencers are pawns of control. The strategy of brands is to create a space in which there is an interaction between users and marketable content produced through user-generated-content.

"Throughout history, the advent of new information technologies has often empowered successive waves of people at the expense of transitional owner brokers... Then as now, access to information and to new communication channels meant new opportunities to participate, to hold power to account and to direct the course of one's life with greater agency" (Arvidsson 6). True empowerment and autonomy over our own lives are placed in our hands for the first time, or so brands want users to believe. On the

topic of control, Arvidsson affirms everything discussed so far in talking about the interesting mentality that the newfound democratization of technology had brought,

“Digital empowerment will be, for some, the first experience of empowerment in their lives, enabling them to be heard, counted and taken seriously—all because of an inexpensive device they carry in their pocket. As a result, authoritarian governments will find their newly connected populations more difficult to control, repress and influence, while democratic states will be forced to include many more voices (individuals, organizations, and companies) in their affairs. To be sure, governments will always find ways to use new levels of connectivity to their advantage, but because of the way current network technology is structured, it truly favors the citizens, in ways we will explore later” (Arvidsson 7).

1992 represents the entertaining of the idea of citizens becoming more involved in their affairs. 2017 is proof of not only the aspirations of 1992 being realized on a global scale but also the implementation of the responses that authoritarian governments were projected to have. However, in 2017, brands are the authoritarian governments and their means of control and influence over the connected populations manifest themselves in platforms we discussed, such as YouTube.

II. The Illusion of Freedom

“Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control. I am not saying this is the only aim of highways, but people can travel infinitely and ‘freely’ without being confined while being perfectly controlled. That is our future” (Deleuze 332). Gilles Deleuze, in “Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews,” introduces the topic of this chapter perfectly. A highway is an excellent metaphor for the false sense of security and control that users possess in the digital medium. It is designed to not only allow and direct us to where we want to go but also to give us full control in our ensuing decisions; however, both are done only within the limits of where the highway will take you. The larger powers that, in fact, created the highway systems are the ones that dictate where you can actually go. We the users believe that we have control over where and when we do things, but such only exists as a subset of the control that the larger framework exercises over the user population. In this chapter, “The Illusion of Freedom,” I continue the narrative I began in “Interactivity as a Form of Control,” but pivot in a different direction. Society, and the world at large, is at an all-time high of users who interact with technology and possess digital identities, in one form or another. It is not uncommon for many to find purpose and meaning in their digital presences more than their actual lives off the screen. So, what happens when it becomes known and accepted that none of us have true autonomy and control over our relationships with technology? What does it mean for users on the digital medium to have a false sense of security of their digital identities and the control they believe they possess of what they believe to be theirs? We

are led to believe that our social media accounts and digital avatars are our own and that we hold autonomy over what, how, and when we post and digest content; however, I plan to explore how the reality is not such and why it is naive to believe so.

We have acknowledged that the digital medium's nature is one of infinite size and variation, but the caveat is that "as this space grows larger, our understanding of nearly every aspect of life will change, from the minutiae of our daily lives to more fundamental questions about identity, relationships and even our own security" (Schmidt and Cohen 4). Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen of Google embody the excitement surrounding how "mass adoption of the Internet is driving one of the most exciting social, cultural and political transformations in history" (Schmidt and Cohen 4). *The New Digital Age: Transforming Nations, Businesses, and Our Lives* was written and published in 2013, and four years later, the effects and continued results from this transformation are both revolutionary and numerous. In the previous chapter, I had referenced information and ideas from their book. However, in the previous chapter, I did not acknowledge the backgrounds of the authors themselves and how they pertain to the subject at hand. Eric Schmidt, from 2001 through 2011, was Google's active CEO and still holds considerable power within the tech giant as an executive. Jared Cohen, unsurprisingly, is another powerful voice at Google; Cohen leads a division within Google, called "Google Ideas," that focuses on solving the social and political issues that the advancement of technology has introduced to society. It is important to recognize that as individuals who have Google blood running through their veins, there is going to be a clear bias in the narrative they portray about the digital medium. There is no question that the two would want to

portray the digital medium in the most benevolent manner because Google's financial profit, and thus their own, is dependent on the success of the medium.

Schmidt and Cohen say that “on the world stage, the most significant impact of the spread of communication technologies will be the way they help reallocate the concentration of power away from the states and institutions and transfer it to individuals” (Schmidt and Cohen 6). Having identified the authors' backgrounds, I find it particularly ironic that they talk about the redistribution of power as if states and institutions want to and are willingly redistributing the said power to the individuals. It is naive to believe that institutions and organized structures like Google are truly transferring the power of control they held and handing it to the individuals they held [and in actuality continue] to hold it over. Google would love for its users to believe they are the ones with control. The more ignorance users possess, the more Google can capitalize on it, and the more money they can make and power they can amass. The reality of the situation, though, is that while institutions that do not have a strong grasp of technology and the digital medium may lose much of their power to the individual, firms like Google continue to exercise the majority of it, and perpetuate a deceptive narrative that they are giving power to the individual. “Digital empowerment will be, for some, the first experience of empowerment in their lives, enabling them to be heard, counted and taken seriously—all because of an inexpensive device they carry in their pocket” (Schmidt and Cohen 6). In Schmidt and Cohen's narrative, they paint this “empowerment” as positive and progressive change; however, there is a flaw in their literary propaganda. By saying that digital empowerment is the first form of empowerment and control some will experience, it supports the fact that individuals do

not have an actual, realistic grasp of what it means to possess control over their lives and that their allegedly empowering smartphones are scapegoats and false devices of empowerment. As stated before, for the older institutions that do not capitalize on the digital medium, users can see an increase in control; however, in the case of technology firms that control the digital space like Google, users are truly at their mercy without even realizing it.

The implications of perpetuating this mentality are chilling. By basically living lies, society is like a herd of sheep, wandering and being coaxed in the directions that the shepherds want us to move in. In simpler terms: we do not have true autonomy over our choices and decisions, and they are so layered and deeply embedded into our daily patterns and behaviors that we refuse to believe it.

Social media platforms are ones that dominate, understand, and even provide individuals the connection to the digital space, lending themselves to a purpose similar to that of Google. Not only do they do this, but they also are products of empowerment through technology that Schmidt and Cohen talk about; by creating, controlling, and maintaining ownership of their digital identity detached from reality, individuals can portray their life in however manner they so choose. One of the largest social media platforms, Instagram, is a particularly interesting case study in the online culture and digital norms that it perpetuates. Seen also in the larger cultural effect of social media, Instagram as a digital social space influences its community in promoting certain behaviors and creating a pipeline of users that share a cookie-cutter mentality of content sharing and consumption. For users that spend a considerable amount of time on the platform, there is a high chance that they have heard about “tricks of the trade” like the

optimal times to upload a post that will maximize engagement with the community, equating to more likes and comments. “True, anthropologists and historians have established that consumers (and other kinds of users) have always been productive, giving their own meanings and functions to goods (and other kinds of objects) in the practices of their everyday lives” (Arvidsson 12). Technology and spaces of social media give a false sense of power to these individuals, under the guise of consumers “giving their own meanings and functions to goods,” the brands are really the ones that spoon-feed the consumers that false sense of control and empowerment. Somehow, Instagram has come to convince millions of users that the double-tapping of an image is of actual significance to their life; somehow, we the users have come to own what the social media platforms consider quantifiable engagement with their product as affirmation of our own digital existences. If you do not upload beautiful content, have an aesthetic feed, tag your friends and the locations you were at, then you, by the perpetuated community standards of Instagram, are ‘losing’ on the platform. Even though Instagram is branded as a digital social media sandbox in which one can share their personal visual story, many find themselves falling into the pipeline of certain behaviors and aesthetics. There was always a reason for feeds being flooded with near-identical posts from different accounts. On the surface, it is easy to accept the tendencies of the community to post, like, comment, and consume content in the manner it does; however, upon closer inspection, one cannot help but wonder how such behavior became normalized and widely accepted.

The afterword of *The New Digital Age: Transforming Nations, Businesses, and Our Lives* was written a year after its publication. In the chapter, the Schmidt and Cohen continue the conversation they started, talk about further developments that took place in

the year following the book's publication they deemed relevant to their discussion, and respond to the criticism the book received. They mention how “Julian Assange, who memorably referred to us as ‘witch doctors’ for ‘technocratic imperialism’—suggested that we don’t appreciate how much large technology firms influence digital norms and practices” (Schmidt and Cohen 261). While humorous in the absurdity of his statement, there is truth in what Assange says. Instagram, as previously discussed, is the embodiment of this statement. The two respond to Assange’s accusation with their acknowledgment and defense. “It’s true that technology firms can threaten the liberty of individuals. It’s true that technology firms influence digital norms and practices. Given their role in shaping the platforms and tools that we use every day, how could it be otherwise?” (Schmidt and Cohen 261). To draw a parallel example, Schmidt and Cohen are essentially saying here that the individual who invented, say a coffee mug, obviously intended for it to be used in a specific manner and that people will use it in both for the purpose it was created and for how they want to use it. But to make such a statement is obvious and redundant. Whether the firms are the creators of the platforms or not, they are still used as a form of control and capitalization of interactivity. They said it themselves; the Instagram’s and Googles of the digital space influence digital norms and therefore threaten the liberty of individuals.

Aside from the digital norms of existential affirmation of users’ digital identities perpetuated by Instagram, more fundamentally, Instagram promotes a culture of heavy fabrication, alteration, and curation of content. On the platform, it is rare to find media that accurately reflects the true nature of the person, event, or whatever the post is depicting. Our society of eight-second attention spans paired with the scrolling-dependent

user interface of Instagram, in its own way, forces creators to post content that catches the attention of consumers if they want engagement. Instagram is fundamentally built to reward the most visually attention-grabbing content with affirmation in the form of more likes and comments. Posts that reflect the true nature of real-life are no longer enough to grasp the attention of digital consumers; Instagram is a space filled with a sea of facades that warp the truth of the lives we live. Digging deeper, Instagram allows for users to have absolute control over the presentation of their digital identities, contributing to a space in which real and fake are indistinguishable from one another. The relationship is paradoxical; the control individuals possess over how they present their digital identity takes away from the community's ability to discern what is true and what is not.

Looking back to Arvidsson, this complex and deceptive nature of digital spaces like Instagram leave the community vulnerable to the manipulation of brands and firms. "The culture industries began to discover the productive potential of this socialized creativity and to position it as an internal element to their own value chains" (Arvidsson 14). Brands, firms, and the larger culture industry recognize the potential of power they can harness in the [new] consumer culture that technology brought, and today they take advantage and own that power in the form of alleged consumer power they attempt to convince users they possess. "The brand is a mechanism that encloses, empowers and controls such affective investments so that they provide measurable, and hence valuable results" (Arvidsson 22). Results. Results are what the brand seeks, and results are attainable in the control that exists in spaces like Instagram.

Looking at Instagram on a deeper level, there is a small phenomenon colloquially referred to as "finstas." The term "finsta" itself comes from combining "fake" and "insta"

(short for Instagram), thus generating the appropriate name for the fake underground accounts that users have started creating. Conceived from the general sentiment of users rebelling against the behavioral norms perpetuated by the digital community and platform itself, finstas are fake Instagram accounts meant for posting free from the social pressures that come with posting content to the larger audience on main accounts. Finstas are a form of escapism from the facade of Instagram's feed, combatting the pressure for heavy editing and curation and rather reflecting a real, raw digital identity. Taylor Lorenz, a reporter for Mic Network, wrote an article centered around personal accounts from several teens regarding their finstas in "The secret Instagram accounts teens use to share their realest, most intimate moments." In the article, Lorenz interviews several teens who are active on both their real Instagram account and their finsta account. One seventeen-year-old girl says that she only posts "the best parts and the big, good parts of my life" on her primary account. "It's not the full picture". On the other hand, her "finsta is where she gets real. 'On my finsta, it's the good, the bad and the ugly. It's a more multifaceted version of me,' she says" (Lorenz, "The secret Instagram accounts teens use to share their realest, most intimate moments"). If the finsta is the true identity and reflection of digital users' identities, then is Instagram simply a sea of facades that people are led on to believe are the truth? To draw a comparison, the finsta movement is much like the Biennial countermovement to the institutional white cube found in museums. The white cube of the institutional museum was created on the "thought to be 'neutral' and 'pure,' an ideal support for the presentation of an art unencumbered by architectural, decorative, or other distractions" (Filipovic, "The Global White Cube"). On the contrary, biennials

were created as a counterproposal to the regular programming of the museum. Elena Filipovic in her “The Global White Cube” defines the Biennial movement as,

“Recurring every two or three or even every five years... lack[ing] real visibility beyond the duration of their exhibition... [having] an explicit ambition both to represent their region, host city, or nation... display[ing] a decidedly international panorama of contemporary production... [and] often are dispersed over multiple public spaces and institutional sites” (Filipovic, “The Global White Cube”)

A direct connection can be made between the digital norms of curated aesthetics and the pursuit of trends perpetuated by Instagram and the sterile, institutional white cube that she describes. Conversely, the rebellious finsta movement is a form of escapism to share raw, unfiltered content with a select audience, much like the counterculture movement that the biennials were founded on. Members of the finsta movement continue to take pride in their “transparency” and deviation from the traditional mentality of Instagram, but their behavior only continues to benefit Instagram. By creating more than one account per person, Instagram tallies up even more “users” in their space, equating to more cumulative user time, and consequently more financial income. Both the finsta and biennial movements are seen to meet similar fates.

Filipovic takes a step back in his main discourse to acknowledge that “despite the numerous reasons to extol mega-exhibitions, it is necessary to examine the curious discrepancy between their accompanying discourses... and the conventions through which they frame the artworks on view” (Filipovic, “The Global White Cube”). While biennial art promotes a strong narrative of being divergent and against everything that the institutionalization of the white cube and museum, there is a harsh reality beyond what is

said. “No one seems to want to speak about it, but no matter how fervently biennials... insist on their radical distinction from the idea of the museum; they overwhelmingly show artworks in specially constructed settings that replicate the rigid geometries, white partitions, and windowless spaces of the museum’s classical exhibitions, that is, when biennials are not simply bringing artworks into existing museums without altering their white cubes” (Filipovic, “The Global White Cube”). Biennials sought to be a movement founded on an opposite ethos to museums; however, when all is said and done, they are fundamentally the same as what they fought so strongly against. The same is seen in finstas. "It's just all backward because we call our 'fake Instagram' our finsta, but in reality, the finsta is a more real representation of who we are” (Lorenz, “The secret Instagram accounts teens use to share their realest, most intimate moments”). While finstas aim to escape from the confines of Instagram, it cannot be disputed that these accounts still exist within the platform itself and is slowly becoming democratized and having digital norms start to pop up within the finsta culture itself. To name two traits, a finsta must be private and not be identifiable as your alternate account, and it must be a more authentic and real social media representation of yourself as well.

III. Data Archives and Persistent Surveillance

“Technology isn’t ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (Schmidt and Cohen 261). You know, you are not wrong, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen. But if you think about it, the same argument can be made about a gun. The tool itself is fundamentally neither good nor bad; however, that does not mean that people are not capable of using it in malicious and manipulative ways. The digital medium is fundamentally neutral by nature, but the ones that hold power to control it are moving it in a direction that is manipulative and controlling. The previous two chapters focus on the behavioral tendencies of the digital medium, but in this chapter, I aim to acknowledge and discuss the technical side of the digital medium and the role it plays into the complex equation of control, using specific case studies related to Google. “Data Archives and Persistent Surveillance” discusses the mentality that society has too readily accepted and adopted: our digital information is private and safe. However, this attitude reflects the age-old saying of ‘ignorance is bliss’; our information is not secure nor just our own anymore. The digital medium is an interesting existence, its immateriality allows for immeasurable digital compression of data and invisible peepholes everywhere. By immeasurable digital compression, I am namely talking about the staggering amount of data and information that exists on the digital medium itself. The phrase, “If it’s uploaded to the Internet, it never really goes away” is derived from this idea; everything that has and will exist on the Internet is stored in the archives of trillions of servers in data farms all over the world. The medium’s immateriality also allows for the creation of digital, invisible peepholes for people to perpetually surveil others.

The digital medium and the surveillance that exists as a result of it can be drawn as a parallel to a well-known philosophical model. The panopticon is a famous prison system with philosophical questions surrounding it, designed to allow inmates of an institution to be observed by a single watchman without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. The system is most commonly visually represented as a cylindrical space with a central tower emitting a bright, one-way light source. The inmates are placed in the perimeter of the prison, facing each other and the central tower; not only do they feel the eyes of their fellow inmates on them, they cannot see the watchman in the tower, but the watchman can see them. The watchman has full, one-way visibility of all the inmates from the central tower, lending itself to the very clear power dynamic and constant feeling of being surveilled on the inmates' end. I am making the argument that the digital medium is fundamentally an adaptation of the panopticon, with society as the inmates and brands as the watchman. If you imagine society itself as one large prison, holding us prisoners, the digital medium acts as the central watch tower, which allows the brands or watchman to look into any part our lives whenever they want. "We know that we are being tracked, but are encouraged not to worry about it" (Crain, "Living in a Society of Control"). While it is no secret that technology gathers and collects information on numerous aspects of our lives, ignorance in actuality is bliss. Somehow, the behavioral norm perpetuated is that awareness does not equate to action or even concern. "Encourage" is an interesting choice in language. It implies that the idea is out there and people know about it, but the normative cultural mentality is that it is something we do not have to worry about. To draw a parallel example, take the current state of affairs between the United States and North Korea. The

reality of the situation is that the free world is in a very serious and concerning position, led by questionable leadership and a very clear threat with the potential to create another world war. The political and military tension is something that everyone sees and recognizes as considerably concerning. But not only is no one actively doing anything, but the public sentiment is also one of not taking it seriously enough. We are on the brink of another world war, and people seemingly care more about the new release of the iPhone X, “the most advanced iPhone yet.”

It is important to contextualize the themes explored in this chapter from a more technical point of view. Cathy O’Neil in her book, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, provides such perspective by discussing the reality of the relationship between society and the digital medium.

“The Internet provides advertisers with the greatest laboratory ever for consumer research and lead generation. Feedback from each promotion arrives within seconds... Within hours (instead of months), each campaign can zero in on the most effective messages and come closer to reaching the glittering promise of all advertising: to reach a prospect at the right time, and with precisely the best message to trigger a decision, and thus succeed in hauling in another paying customer. This fine-tuning never stops” (O’Neil 75).

The “fine-tuning,” (O’Neil 75) as she describes it, truly never really stops. We have previously discussed how the immateriality of the digital age allows for individuals to surpass the limitations of real life and manipulate it as a form of control; what O’Neil discusses here is a perfect example of this concept in practice. Advertisers and brands using the digital medium and technology to their advantage also bring up the topic of the Internet of Things, abbreviated as IoT. “[The Internet of Things] is the concept of

basically connecting any device with an on and off switch to the Internet (and/or to each other)” (Morgan, ““A Simple Explanation Of ‘The Internet Of Things’”). Technology is the mode in which our lives become easier. The IoT has an undeniably perfect front for being the bridge between the immaterial digital world and real life, but as O’Neil points out, the reality is that the IoT is the means by which data collection exists and can be used against and to control society. O’Neil goes on to state, “with the Internet, people across the earth have produced quadrillions of words about our lives and work, our shopping, and our friendships. By doing this, we have unwittingly built the greatest-ever training corpus for natural-language machines.” O’Neil is making another nod to the extensive archives of data on the personal aspects of our lives that can be used in different ways, but what are these “natural-language machines” (O’Neil 76)?

In the previous chapters, I had discussed Google in its substantial involvement in the digital medium. Google itself is most famous for its search engine, but a lot of the time, people do not give a second thought to the technology behind the results that the engine pulls up for you when you search key phrases. For example, say you search “funny cat videos.” How does Google know which cat videos to show? The most popular cat videos of all time from years ago? The hottest, trending ones? A tabby cat video because you’ve been streaming a lot of Garfield clips on YouTube? We don’t care, so long as we get our laughs from our feline friends, right? But these are the questions that shed some light on what we unconsciously have become blind to. Google, behind the scenes, is famous for its advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning technology. They are one of the vanguards of society in developing the smartest technology, especially at the consumer level. This technology is the “natural-language

machines” (O’Neil 76) that O’Neil criticizes. Artificial intelligence (A.I.) and machine learning are technologies that are one in the same. Machine learning, technically speaking, a process by which programs perform actions are not explicitly written in their code. “Machine learning, a fast-growing domain of artificial intelligence, the computer dives into the data, following only basic instructions. The algorithm finds patterns on its own, and then, through time, connects them with outcomes. In a sense, it learns” (O’Neil 75). The most important part to look at in O’Neil’s statement is “it learns” (O’Neil 75). The potential for machine learning, in one sense, is incredible. The ability to create programs that learn and evolve at a pace faster than humans can even imagine holds so many potentials for humanity to advance with. In another sense, the potential machine learning holds is undeniably terrifying. Brands are not only already utilizing the technology to pinpoint trends, tendencies, and habits on as specific as an individual basis, but they are also implementing the technology to create marketing models of control to manipulate consumers like puppets, as discussed in the previous chapters. It does not stop there, either. Machine learning is simply a subset of the larger entity of A.I., which is the technological fabrication of consciousness. Through a dystopian lens, A.I. is a digital weapon that has machine learning as only part of its arsenal of modes of power and control. "What a vast majority of people don't understand is that “the data-crunching machines are sifting through our data on their own, searching for our habits and hopes, fears and desires” (O’Neil 75). It is a chilling thought, for technology to know just as much, if not more than what we know about ourselves.

However, the scale of information is too large for humans to realistically process on their own. The future of A.I. only gets more unsettling when you combine the said

archives of data and pair it with A.I. What was previously unable to be made sense of by humans can be processed by A.I. at an exponentially faster rate. Through this artificial technology, brands are able to generate digestible insights that can be used in practical ways, subjectively speaking to their favor, of course.

Imagine artificial intelligence packaged up in a popularized commercial product. To celebrate and advertise the release of the new Google Home Mini, the smaller and cheaper edition of the original smarthome device, Google Home, Google launched a national pop-up campaign: “Google Home Mini, Donut Shop.” During select weekends in October and November of this year, nine different states across the US held eleven different donut shop-themed shops. “The new Google Home Mini is the size of a donut, with the powers of a superhero. Come get a taste at one of our pop-up donut shops,” (“Google Home Mini Donut Shop”) explaining why the specific choice in donut shops. Visitors had the chance to win either two donuts or a Google Home Mini, after waiting in usually a several-hour- long line wait, of course. After interacting with a Google Home Mini in the shop, each participant would walk out with either two frosted donuts or a Google Home Mini, priced at \$50 MSRP. People obviously wanted to score a free Google Home Mini, so thousands of people in Southern California, including myself, drove to Venice Beach to visit the pop-up on Abbot Kinney Boulevard. During the open hours of 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM, easily over 4000 people braved the Los Angeles heat and waited in line, over the course of the weekend. The strategy by which Google decided to give out the prizes was through what they call, “Winning Times.” Simply put, the system distributed Google Home Minis according to specific times that Google had selected beforehand. However, upon a closer read through the rules of the competition, it was

apparent that Google was strategically vague and cryptic in their language. “The first Eligible Participant to enter at the Winning Time will be the potential winner of the seeded prize” (“US Terms (excluding New York)”). Even if a participant enters at the “Winning Time,” they still only are a “potential winner of the seeded prize”? So how exactly does one win the Google Home Mini? The terms and conditions for the pop-ups only raise more questions. Per said terms and conditions, there were approximately 250 Google Home Minis distributed to each location per day (“US Terms (excluding New York)”). Over the course of an eight-hour open period, that would mean a Google Home Mini would be given to a participant every thirty minutes, statistically speaking. That being said, not only did both the person I visited the pop-up with and I won Google Home Minis at the same time, but I also saw people go in at the same time and some walk out with Google Home Minis and other not. Additionally, another person I know visited the pop-up in Venice Beach later in the day and did not win a Google Home Mini, while another friend visited the pop-up in St. Louis and won a Google Home Mini.

At this point, it comes down to speculation and theories. Having analyzed the terms and conditions and cross-referencing them with my experience at the pop-up and my understanding of the potential of technology to push an agenda, I have a theory as to how people can actually win a Google Home Mini. Mark Andrejevic, in “Framelessness, or the Cultural Logic of Big Data,” sets the stage perfectly. “Amazon Go stores, for example, anticipate a world in which stores track individual users as they move through the aisles, using cameras, Wi-Fi, microphones, and a range of other sensors to monitor and analyze every movement in detail” (Andrejevic 2). I believe that a possible explanation for why users are still only “potential winners,” even after entering at a

“Winning Time,” is that Google creates a sub-pool of potential winners within the ones that enter at the “Winning Times.” Using technology similar to that found in Amazon Go stores, Google would be able to tell if the participant has their smartphone out with a social media app open, recording the experience. It is a possibility that those who recorded the experience with the intent to share it with their social media network were more likely to win a Google Home Mini. Obviously, Google Home Mini winners are more inclined to share their excitement with everyone, myself and my two friends included. By giving the grand prize to these participants, Google is optimizing their digital reach and positive reflection of the brand. In theory, it is a masterful way of optimization and killing two birds with one stone. The person I attended the pop-up with, my friend in St. Louis, and I all won Google Home Minis with one trait in common: we all had our smartphones in-hand and recorded the experience through the social media platforms of Snapchat and Instagram. The one person who did not win the Google Home Mini did not record and share the experience on social media when he visited the pop-up.

Taking a step back, there is something to acknowledge regarding the entire pop-up campaign itself. Large firms like Google are no strangers to giveaways to promote new products, but the scale and scope of the marketing and execution of the Donut Shop pop-ups was unlike any other. So why did Google go all in on this particular campaign? The answer lies in the product itself. The Google Home device is the embodiment the Internet of Things technology; in fact, it is the control center for a network of the Internet of Things devices within a household. Being the brain for a smarthome, Google Home is a powerful medium of information collection. Via voice commands, Google Home can turn on the lights, change the temperature on your thermostat, turn on a movie on your

TV, answer your questions, play a playlist on Spotify, the list is endless. And just like that, Google has gathered information patterns of when you are in specific rooms, how warm you like your home, what entertainment you prefer, what burning questions you have, and your favorite music. There have even been several accounts of Google Homes being silently triggered and listening to conversations, which Google claimed to be a “bug” (Smith, “Google Home Mini caught recording everything and sending all the data to Google”). It has done a complete pattern of life analysis of you, the consumer, and given all of that information back to Google. Imagine a network of Google Homes in the homes of millions, collecting data which is inputted into machine learning algorithms that output insights that allow Google to better control its consumer population. It becomes clear at this point why Google would invest so much money and energy into the Google Home Mini Donut Shop campaign. Google would only benefit by giving away thousands of its data-scraping drones in order to collect even more data on a larger population of users. The Google Home Mini Donut Shop campaign is the embodiment of technology taking advantage of the consumer mentality in presenting it as something that consumers believe they want, but having a hidden, self-serving agenda of control. The IoT creates framelessness, a term that Andrejevic coins. “Comprehensive data capture is also the goal of the recreation of entire spaces in the virtual realm and perhaps of an emerging aesthetic of “framelessness.” If you want to reproduce a space in its entirety, you need to collect all the information about it you can” (Andrejevic 5). By owning a device like Google Home, you are creating a network of IoT devices, which allows for a more efficient, technology-driven environment; however, by doing so, you are allowing for more access points of data collection on your personal life. "The rise of in-home “virtual

assistants” including Amazon’s Echo, Google Home, and LG’s Hub Robot herald an area of constant connectivity... Such devices capture everything that is said all the time -- and thus an expanding array of information about tastes, preferences, desires, needs, and patterns of life. In principle there is no limit on the range of information to be captured” (Andrejevic 5). Google has continually addressed the concerns regarding security and data collection, ensuring that customer information is private and not shared with third parties. However, Google technically owns all of the information that all of the distributed Google Homes collect, contributing to the inconceivably large archive of data that the larger framework has amassed on society. Given such information regarding the Google Home Mini, it also becomes apparent that Google would be inclined to do a mass giveaway of their data-collecting drones. “The ‘smart’ home space does double and triple duty as both shopping mall and market research laboratory” (Andrejevic 3). Data is the new gold, and we are the subjects in the height of a data rush.

Google is also no stranger to taking ownership of its users’ information. Such is seen in their wildly popular Google Drive. Google Drive is their cloud storage and management service. There is, though, a subtle difference between Google Drive and its competitors, such as Dropbox and Microsoft OneDrive. Google Drive’s terms read as follows, “When you upload or otherwise submit content to our Services, you give Google (and those we work with) a worldwide license to use, host, store, reproduce, modify, create derivative works... communicate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute such content.” Ultimately, “Google does *not* own user-uploaded files to Google Drive, but the company can do whatever it likes with them” (Whittaker, “Who owns your files on Google Drive?”). This affirms Google’s deceptive nature and its habit of

ambiguity and vagueness when it comes to the language they use. Even though the Google Home Mini pop-up case study was largely grounded in theory, the Google Drive example definitely makes it more believable for Google have carried out what I had speculated.

As I stated before, I recognize that the nature of my argument regarding the Google Home Mini example is fundamentally speculative and supported with too small of a sample size, but everything I said to support my case is very much indicative of the exploitation that happens in the digital space if my theory proves to be true. Archives of data teamed up with persistent surveillance comes in so many different forms. In a more explicit example, Facebook is another great firm seen to accomplish similar tasks to what Google does. If you were to look at Facebook's location check-in feature, you would simply see it on the surface as the app empowering you with the ability to inform your digital network that you are in Hawaii for vacation with your family. But the true nature of such a feature allows for Facebook to track its users and learn about traveling behaviors and allow for more targeted advertising based on said behaviors and locations. This is only one feature of the app, not even getting into the claims people have made about the app listening in on their conversations in real life using the microphone in their smartphones and consequently giving them advertisements based off those conversations (Statt, "Facebook officially addressed the conspiracy theory about listening to your phone calls").

IV. The Democratization of Technical Tools and the Rise of Interfaces

The final topic I aim to discuss is “The Democratization of Technical Tools and the Rise of Interfaces,” in which I talk about how the increased use and influence of interfaces as tools that blur the previously needed steps and our obsession with efficiency. I accomplish this in discussing the case studies of iTunes and the iPhone. By democratization of technical tools, I am namely referring to processes that increasingly have become widely accessible to users that were not before, through the grace of the exponential growth of technology. Additionally, interfaces are also players in this game of technological democratization. Interfaces are physical or digital existences that expedite technological processes and allow users to complete tasks with less relative effort. In theoretical practice, instead of having to go through points “B” and “C” to get from “A” to “D,” interfaces aim to allow users to go straight from “A” to “D,” completely bypassing “B” and “C.” However, the more steps blurred by interfaces creates more means in which information collection and exploitive steps can be implemented. Because users do not see points “B” and “C” means that the creators and controllers of the interface can hide exploitive features or processes at those points without the users ever realizing it. Due to the tendency for interfaces eliminating more and more intermediary steps, an obsession with hyper-efficiency and to make everything “easier” using technology has become popularized and is on the upward trend. New technologies such as automation substituting manual labor and artificial intelligence replacing humans are what society is looking forward to now. My stance on the topic is clear: society’s obsession with making everything easier is dangerous. My opinion is not an isolated one

either; both Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking, two of the biggest faces in the future of technology and science, have clearly stated that the one piece of technology that they are the most terrified of is artificial intelligence. Behind it all, technology brands and firms are often the creators of the interfaces that supposedly make our lives easier in every way; they are the ones that mask said interfaces behind society's obsession with making everything easier, exploiting users in the process.

Although a little dated now, Apple's online digital music library, iTunes, is a perfect example of an interface during the time of its creation. In *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, author Jeremy Morris discusses the culture surrounding the mass democratization of music through the advent of Apple's monopoly over the digital music market. "If there's a current "winner" in the online music retail business, it's Apple and its iTunes Music Store" (Morris 132). Before Apple introduced the iPod and the partner software iTunes with it, the primary manner in which people consumed music was either in person or through CDs. Apple dropping the iPod and iTunes to the public and instantly democratizing music and expanding the market on a massive scale was revolutionary. "Apple's iTunes Music Store, though it has plenty of patents of its own, took another tack in its quest for control over music retail, one that involved both convincing users of the value of a digital music commodity and creating a network of connected hardware and software to manage musical experiences" (Morris 133). Through creating iTunes, the digital interface that provides consumers access to the digital library of music, Apple was able to gain control of and power over the market. Similar to previously questioning how Instagram came to perpetuate the digital norm of its users placing inherent value in likes and comments on posts, iTunes perpetuated its own mentality of users wanting

intangible, digital copies of music that they store in their personal devices through iTunes. Morris says that “it did far more than resell music in the online environment; it promoted a kind of digital lifestyle management that embedded both music hardware and software ever more ubiquitously into everyday life” (Morris 134). That is the thing: iTunes was created not to be simply a digital platform that delivers music, but rather a digital experience that would be able to sink its claws into the consumer in more ways than one. It seeks “to bind user practices through a series of hardware and software innovations” (Morris 145). Notice the language; “bind” does not have a positive connotation. iTunes is an immensely influential interface, especially in its beginning, but its existence created something larger than itself. “As a result large swaths of everyday Internet activity are now covered by business method patents... even if users and businesses regularly disregard the need to pay licenses to the patent holders.” (Morris 135). Other interfaces have adopted the iTunes model and created adaptations and variations that continue to permute ways to control users. “These various legal attempts to establish or maintain control in an emerging market underscore how the introduction of new technologies is rarely a stable and cohesive process. There is a certain ‘interpretative flexibility’ that accompanies the advent of new technologies” (Morris 135). With all of the said patents and legality of digital copyright content, Digital Rights Management was created to step in.

DRM is “a kind of technology-driven regulatory strategy that chains consumers to “tethered appliances”—devices whose use is highly prescribed and limited by proprietary controls” (Morris 135). Apple, through iTunes, is a textbook DRM that binds its users to the platform, with its “tethered appliance” being the iPod. There is a hidden nature to

digital interfaces like iTunes. Although obvious, in order for people to take ownership of digital property, the platform that hosts and provides the content still needs to exist.

Looking at it from another angle, iTunes created a three-step framework that would ensure its financial success. iTunes created the first digital experience that provided the masses with the means of listening to music anywhere and anytime, democratizing music on the largest scale. In providing the experience that the millions on the platform came to love, Apple created an undeniable dependency in its users on iTunes. Without iTunes, users no longer have access to all of the music that they previously believed they owned. This model that Apple had built for iTunes simultaneously created a digital experience that consumers love and ensured its financial security through the dependency that said users have on the platform.

There are several interesting things to point out about the iTunes model. We see that democratization, or rather a democratization that marketers and brands want users to believe in in order to exploit them, in certain cases, produces an effect of dependency in its users. Along the same vein, the actual digital nature of the music itself is something worth visiting. iTunes creates a consumer mentality that after clicking on the “purchase” button and spending ninety-nine cents, they now “own” the music; the reality however, is that because of the intangible, digital nature of the product, the music does not truly belong to the consumer. This is not only seen in the digital music of iTunes, but in the coming years, we see the same effect in Apple’s digital books in iBooks and the movies and television shows that iTunes will come to provide. Interestingly, the same mentality is continued to be found in the updated interfaces of digital music possession of Apple Music and Spotify, which in turn acknowledges how consumers have been conditioned to

believe that digital purchases equates to true ownership. Both platforms are subscription-based, adding an additional digital layer between the content and the consumer. Under the guise of empowering the consumer with even more content and more music to choose from, subscription-based content further distances the consumer from actually owning content. Subscription-based interfaces now eliminate even the step of clicking the “purchase” button for each transaction that indicates the feeling of ownership.

Customer-Relations Managements are the manifestation of what was just discussed as iTunes being a DRM and combining that with the topic of the previous chapters of control that the digital medium allows firms to hold over its consumers. Morris continues the conversation in saying,

“Furthermore, there are other kinds of practices that ‘lock’ consumers into specific technologies... Customer-Relations Management (CRM) is a subtler strategy that involves the collection of massive amounts of user data, purchase preferences, and customization options that are generated during digital transactions. This personal information is sorted, analyzed, and presented back to the customer as part of the appeal of a given digital music service” (Morris 144)

This quotation is not only essential to the discussion of interfaces, but also clear in bringing in the topics of the previous chapters and seeing how they all connect. Take brands exercising power and control over its users, data collection on users’ habits, preferences, and information, interfaces hiding all of these characteristics, and consolidate them into one entity. What you are getting are CRMs. The key data collected on the consumer population is processed and exercised by the brand to further control the users, but in a “subtle” and layered manner, of course. “CRM technologies not only have

implications for surveillance; they also create consumer dependencies since it becomes more and more difficult or time-consuming to switch to other systems.” More explicitly though, “Google and Facebook, for example, are able to provide such relevant and useful services because of the amount of data CRM takes in about users across their products” (Morris 144). Having discussed Google and Facebook in the previous chapters, it is more explicitly stated here that they both exist as CRMs and testimonies to a combination of all four chapters of this thesis. Morris concludes the discussion surrounding iTunes perfectly,

“Using interface design as one of its primary tools, the iTunes Store took the confusion and complexity that went along with finding, buying, and playing music online at that moment... and tried to repackage these practices as one seamless activity. Apple's digital music system hid all the wires and guts of the music consumption experience and presented it instead as a coherent unity”

(Morris 145)

However, unsurprisingly, iTunes’s partner in crime and physical vessel is also a great example of the effects of Apple’s monopoly in the music industry. In the wake of the technological sound revolution that the iPod created, Michael Bull in “iPod Use, Mediation, and Privatization in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” looks at Apple’s hyper-popular iPod and its societal effects through a critical lens. While the literature is relatively dated in the timeline of technology, it is important to realize that if the effects discussed in the reading are as impactful back then, the effects seen today are to be exponentially larger. “iPod use is symptomatic of the trend to experience daily life as technologically mediated and seamless” (Bull 104). Referring back to the idea of the IoT

creating a technologically-connected space paired with society's obsession to make everything more easier and more accessible, the iPod and its immediate effects is a perfect example of the two combined.

“Sound, in its fluidity, has seeped into the spaces of everyday life like no other sense. Music has become infinitely reproducible—potentially all space is a mediated sonic space in the twenty-first century” (Bull 104). Music and sound are simply one form of media that has become omnipresent in nature, similar to the IoT effect. In the larger scheme, though, it is simply an additional characteristic of interfaces; not only do they hide the steps that they aim to skip over, but they also grow so large and omnipresent that it becomes normalized in nature. Control and the power of choice also play into the topic at hand. “Users can choose to tune in or tune out of the sonic environments on offer, transforming it or giving in to it” (Bull 105). Interestingly enough, interfaces also invoke empowerment and the ability of choice in users; however, like in the case of users on Instagram, as discussed in chapter two, the empowerment is intentionally misled. Frank is one of several subjects that Bull contextualizes in the effects of the iPod on consumers. “While listening to his iPod Frank feels he is in control of his experience, the contingency of invasive technologies such as the mobile phone are removed within the certainty of his privatized sonic environment” (Bull 108). Although optimistic in language, Bull acknowledges user empowerment through interface technology and ironically, talks about the mobile phone unable to invade the sonic space that the iPod fills. The first thing to recognize is that despite Bull's positive language, he still nods to the negative side of the topic. The second is that contextualized in today's technology, the mobile phone has long since invaded and become an integral contributor to the sonic space that Frank once

valued only the iPod occupied. The immeasurable and exponential evolution of technology is so fast that the characteristics we learn to attribute to technology no longer apply to newer forms, but its blinding speed proves too much for us to be able to keep up with. In other words, it is easy to attribute the iPhone, the evolution of the iPod, as one that allows Frank to be “in control of his experience” (Bull 108) and his sonic space being an impermeable one. “He refers to his iPod as his ‘digital Sherpa’—a constant companion enabling him to successfully navigate daily life—and claims, ‘My iPod goes everywhere with me’” (Bull 107). The reality is that his iPod, his “digital Sherpa”, is the medium in which Apple actually controls Frank already has invaded and occupies his sonic space.

iTunes speaks to the democratization of technology at a consumer level, as seen in Frank’s case. Another one of Apple’s products identifies the democratization of technology from another level, one of the producer. The iPhone was introduced to the world in 2007 and the mobile phone market was not the only one that it completely revolutionized; the camera world would eventually be turned on its head by the technology found in the handheld, all-in-one device that Apple invented. Before the dawn of the iPhone and the consequent smartphone camera revolution, the only ways to shoot pictures were on traditional film and digital cameras. By giving users the power to snap photos with a simple click of a button on a device they would already be carrying around, the iPhone empowered the public with photography and marked the beginning of arguably the largest democratization movement of image capture in history. Today, we see the effects of such movement to be amplified easily tenfold. The mass adoption of not

only iPhones, but the larger smartphone market, has in turn, created a mass population of people equipped with smartphone cameras.

James Bareham, a professional commercial photographer for over 25 years, wrote an article for the Verge called, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever,” in which he talks about the effects of smartphone cameras on the industry. There is a number of interesting points that Bareham makes regarding the shift in the field. The first is his personal response to getting an iPhone himself. “The iPhone’s crappy 2-megapixel camera removed all of the normal concerns over image quality... I was shooting on a phone... a *phone!* It was fun” (Bareham, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever”). The novelty over having a device that does everything you need on a daily basis was exciting in theory and exhilarating in practice. With the introduction of photo applications and the heavier use of smartphone camera use, Bareham realizes he “was in the midst of a fundamental paradigm shift in photography” (Bareham, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever”). See this shift in the creative practice has obviously been met with both positivity and harsh negativity. People claim that the democratization gave more people the power to unlock their creative potential, but others say that by doing so, the art form was killed. In its democratization, photography became too commonplace, the value of great photography was cheaper, and people got lazy.

Bareham’s position on the shift is a little different from either of the previous opinions. Firstly, he claims that “this is nothing new, it’s simply history repeating itself” (Bareham, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever”). Objectively speaking, the smartphone revolution is not a new in its effects. Technological

advances throughout history are seen to have similar, comparable effects as the smartphone camera revolution. Similar effects were seen in the wake of the introduction of digital cameras, Digital SLRs, and point and shoots. Secondly, now that everyone has the ability to take comparable pictures at a surface level, “your equipment no longer defines you, your photographs do” (Bareham, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever”). What Bareham addresses here is the underlying argument between production value and content value. Is media more effective when the production value is higher and the visuals are more well done or when the subject and content itself follows a more creative, stronger, and more compelling storyline? Questions like these are the ones to ask when the playing field is leveled in access and ability.

Like iTunes, the iPhone itself is an interface that masks the intermediary steps in which forms of control are hidden inside. Aside from shifting the world of photography, the iPhone marked the beginning of both the smartphone and social media movements. Smartphones, like the iPhone, created a cultural digital norm of smartphone camera content feeding into social media. The convenience factor of having a camera in your pocket all of the time and also having the ability to upload the pictures taken with said camera to your social channels from the same device is perfect. The metal bricks of technology in our pockets quickly became the digital Swiss Army Knives of our lives we could not live without. Bareham said that “the iPhone was also a catalyst. It introduced me to Instagram” (Bareham, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever”). Bareham is one of many users that jumped on the social media train of Instagram and began to find themselves snapping pictures on their iPhones to

post on their Instagram account. Not long after the popularity of the platform began to surge, a population of users began to develop a fascinating mentality. “Users proudly tout “iPhone Only” on their profiles to distinguish themselves from those now using regular digital cameras — which many Instagram purists view as ‘cheating’” (Bareham, “Post-process: why the smartphone camera changed photography forever”). Not only have smartphones and their cameras basically created an entirely new market for digital platforms to host the content, but also created an extreme type of social media user who denounces the older means of photography. Users have adopted and internalized the identity of an exclusive smartphone camera user and assumes a clear position of authenticity, rooted in the democratized form of photography. I personally find the behavior of “Instagram purists” particularly fascinating. Fundamentally, these individuals who are so attached to the platform, believe that it is a space dedicated to the basic production capabilities of smartphones and that those who have more advanced equipment and a more advanced knowledge of production do not belong on the platform and are deemed as “cheaters.” Positionality of authenticity is seen to be taken to a new level in this case.

The social media world that the iPhone created is only a part of the larger reason why it is considered to be an interface. Since the release of the original iPhone in 2007, Apple has had over ten years now to evolve and refine its flagship device. In those ten years, the camera has become one of the most important features and one of the easiest to use features to use on the iPhone. Speaking from a user-interface perspective, the camera on the original iPhone had gone from a 2 MP camera accessed on the back of the phone to 12 MP cameras on the front and back of the newest iPhone X, conveniently accessible

from a swipe to the left from the lock screen. Additionally, the camera now has the ability to record 4K video, slow-motion video, and shoot in aperture priority mode, in which users can take photographs with adaptive presets that produce visual effects that would previously require extensive knowledge in both production and post-production. The extent to which media production is continually being democratized through advances in technology is accelerating faster than users can realistically adapt. I make the argument that by equipping and spoon-feeding users with more ways to shoot pictures and record videos in different variations, they are more inclined to use these features, then post and browse the various social media platforms on which these new forms of content are posted. Although Apple does not directly own a visual social media platform itself, it directly benefits from more users using said platforms, as their products provide arguably the best experience on them. We never think about these implications, but such is the effect of interfaces and the goal of those who methodically create them.

Conclusion

I wrote “The Digital Puppetmaster” with the intent to bring to light the negligence and obliviousness of users on the digital medium that I continuously criticized. I believe that it is becoming more and more crucial for society to understand the larger forms of control that are being exercised and in what ways they do it. The more time passes, the more deeply embedded the forms of control become and the harder it will be to uncover these truths and act upon them. Those who control are gaining more power every day and those who are controlled are still at a halt. As a millennial, technology and the digital medium plays an enormous role in my life, which is why I chose to talk about it as the topic of my thesis. Ignorance is no longer bliss; ignorance is the nodes at which the digital puppetmaster attaches its strings of control.

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