Title: Our data, ourselves: Vertical interfaces and surveillance in mobile social media

Bio: Yoel Roth is a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, USA (yoel@asc.upenn.edu).

Abstract

With more than 7 million active users in 192 countries, the gay-targeted mobile geosocial networking service Grindr has become a technological mainstay of contemporary gay life. Integrating a wide range of textual, visual, and location data within a user-friendly interface, Grindr allows its users to browse, in real time, an interactive catalog of nearby men — for purposes as varied as making new friends, finding dates, or arranging casual sexual encounters. As increasing numbers of gay, bisexual, curious, and questioning men turn to geosocial services like Grindr to seek social and sexual interactions, how should we parse the impact of these novel mobile interfaces on the rendering of gay bodies and identities online? In a widely-varied network of users, software developers, and commercial actors, who is watching whom — and to what ends?

This research examines Grindr, the most popular gay geosocial networking application and one of the pioneers in the mobile dating industry, with a focus on the work of social networking interfaces in rendering visible certain types of bodies, identities, and interactions in networked contexts. I advance two related claims: First, that the interface conventions introduced by Grindr (and have now diffused to other applications and social contexts) enable and manifest a shift from *horizontally-mediated* social interactions to *vertically-mediated* ones, in which multiple types and layers of data converge within a single interactive scene. Second, this vertical mediation relies upon three interrelated schemas of surveillance: of users surveilling themselves; of services surveilling their users; and of users surveilling each other. While many studies of networked surveillance have focused on commercially-driven structures of power and observation, I argue that users themselves are drawn into surveillant practices through digital interfaces that provide vertical views of individuals, communities, and social interactions.

Title: Smartphones as Surveillant Agents – New Practices of Identity and the Reconceptualisation of Public Space

Bio: Thomas Christian Bächle is a Research Fellow at the Department of Media Studies, University of Bonn, Germany (tbaechle@uni-bonn.de).

Abstract

Mobile communication devices have been theorized as having a huge impact on the allegedly hitherto clear-cut private/public divide, contesting the former by extending the latter, or fundamentally altering the very nature of our social relationships. These wildly changing social and cultural dynamics are now seemingly extended and accelerated by technical devices such as smartphones and tablets which facilitate three characteristic new functions: First, they allow users to be permanently connected to the internet and their respective social networks – making the invasive nature of networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr truly ubiquitous. Second, these devices are 'location-based' and offer applications such as interactive maps or 'check-in' services, which relates media use to physical places or social spaces in a never seen before fashion. Third, these devices promote a new culture of visibility, as all types of social interaction, object or performance can potentially be recorded and shared with a disperse audience of friends and followers.

This presentation aims to focus on two interwoven consequences from these changing practices of media use, effectively turning social networks into visual social media. (1) Smartphone cameras allow the documentation of virtually any social context, which leads to an essential shift in the quality of public space(s). This is mainly due to the loss of anonymity, being of fundamental importance to the quality of 'the public' in a liberal sense. The Foucauldian notion of Panopticism is revived in these media practices, as visibility and non-verifiability are two of their basic traits. Social interactions and settings, such as meeting friends in a café, are qualitatively redefined when smartphone users decide to take pictures of this social setting and share it to an unknown Instagram or Twitter community. The potential, paradoxically absent presence of a third party not only changes the perception of the social context. This modulation of the Third Party Effect (Mead) also leads to a stronger standardization of social interactions. Closely linked to this reconceptualisation of public space and social interactions are (2) new practices of identity, depending on intricate strategies of visibility and visualization of the self. Besides new visual genres such as the 'selfie', only contextualized by hash-tags, formerly intimate aspects and practices of identity

such as sex, disease or death have been transformed into aesthetically elaborate strategies of self-presentation. These surveillant qualities of the new – visual – mobile media seem to establish a new and powerful Society of the Spectacle (Debord).

Title: Forensic devices for activism: on how activists use mobile device tracking for the production of public proof

Bio: Lonneke van der Velden is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) at the University of Amsterdam.

Abstract

This paper describes the various ways in which a mobile phone application, InformaCam, creatively turns a problem, that of mobile device tracking, into a method for the production of public proof. The widespread use of mobile devices by human rights activists and organizations has raised a new set of concerns. First, mobile devices, and the communication they allow for, can be easily tracked. Second, the documentation that is produced by mobile devices is often instable: because digital material is vulnerable to manipulation, verifying its authenticity has become key. This is further complicated by the volume of images and video that are captured and uploaded. Against the backdrop of these concerns citizen journalists and human rights activists and organizations are faced with the question of how to investigate and prove the truth of an event using digital technologies without being traced themselves.

InformaCam, developed by The Guardian Project, is a mobile phone application in the making that deals with metadata, such as GPS data or the device number, embedded in the make-up of a file. When posting images or videos online one likely also uploads potentially identifying metadata along with it. InformaCam allows users to remove metadata and to diminish the chance that they can be identified or located. However, InformaCam also makes a second version of the image. In this version, contextual metadata is not obscured but deliberately captured, encrypted and stored. One could even add specific metadata about the setting in which the image was taken and annotate the images with the help of categories that legal experts consider relevant. Hence, InformaCam mobilizes the tracking capacity of mobile devices for the sake of producing potential evidence. Moreover, when images are assembled together the annotated data could prove useful for (online) investigation into an event.

Similar to what forensic experts do with their instruments, the InformaCam project makes invisible data visible and connects them to legal protocols. Inspired by the work of Susan Schuppli and Andrew Barry, I introduce the term "forensic device" to emphasize that this application is not just a tool, but a way of arranging things by bringing together the legal arena and metadata in a manner that is useful for a particular form of activism.

Title: Achieving "Proper Distance" in Infrastructures for Public Witnessing: Analyzing the design and discourse of Google Glass

Bio: Mike Ananny is an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and Affiliated Faculty with USC's Science, Technology and Society Cluster, USA (ananny@usc.edu).

Abstract

Grounded in scholarship on witnessing and journalistic witnessing, this paper analyzes how the infrastructure of Google Glass affords and constrains particular kinds of witnessing. I begin by explicating witnessing as a body of literature that has continually grappled with three questions: Who qualifies as a witness? What does witnessing entail? And what is witnessing meant to accomplish? I go on to examine how journalism—and online in journalism in particular—fits within the "field of witnessing," (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2011) examining the unique demands that witnessing places on reporters aiming to be "moral journalists." (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011) I suggest that such morality- summarized by Silverstone as the achievement of "proper distance" (Silverstone, 2007) through media and media technologies—can best be achieved by closely examining how networks of humans and non-humans work together (Latour, 2005) to achieve "networked witnessing": the sociotechnical infrastructures (Star, 1999) that both shape and reflect the public spaces in which certain people are seen to qualify as witnesses, witnessing takes place and is normatively regulated, and in which witnessing has the potential to make social change.

I examine this concept of networked witnessing in light of Google Glass's infrastructure, interviewing early Glass designers, and conducting close, analytical readings of the Glass's user interface, its technical architecture (Glass Development Kit), and design discourse (developer conversations on Stack Overflow and GitHub). I conclude by discussing how Glass infrastructure fails and succeeds to live up to the criteria outlined by scholarship on journalistic witnessing, and how it makes new demands of that literature. Such an investigation, I argue, is critical to understanding how infrastructures like Glass- with the potential to both surveil and witness the human condition—work to configure public spaces.