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Advanced Seminar: Design and Social Practice

An Analysis on Ben Grosser's ScareMail

ScareMail, by artist Ben Grosser, is a browser extension that appends an additional paragraph of meaningless text containing sensitive vocabularies to the user's regular email, in order to disrupt the cyber surveillance from NSA (National Security Agency). Available on Chrome, Safari and Firefox, ScareMail generates a different story every time when it runs, based on the natural language processing of Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel Fahrenheit 451. The nouns and verbs in the original texts are automatically substituted by "scary" words from the keyword list that Department of Homeland Security uses to search in social media, such as "Al Qaeda", "assassination" and "infection".¹ The alternated stories often turn out having no cohesive plot, and even looks odd and funny. It is unrelated to the user's email content, clearly separated from the actual email text by dash lines and a brief sentence of introduction: "Following texts generated by ScareMail". This work is strictly text-based, without any painterly elements attached.

ScareMail is a typical instance of the Illinois-based artist Ben Grosser, who focuses on the social, cultural and political implications of software. He builds interactive installations, generative visualizations, and software plug-ins, in order to examine topics including cyber security, the creativity of human intelligence versus artificial intelligence, and our complex relationship with software in the digital age. However, his work often utilizes humorous approaches to alleviate the seriousness of these topics. Grosser rethinks about people's reactions

¹ Analyst's Desktop Binder.

and interactions relative to the topics, translating them into playful experiences to raise awareness of the issues.

Grosser has developed ScareMail since 2013, as the response to Snowden's leak with no hesitation. Although the generated text has no intentional meanings, let alone social or political threat, ScareMail intends to expand the data pool of these particular words, making the government's surveillance less effective. It puts NSA's surveillance in irony by encouraging individuals to produce meaningless data and make government's predictive search fruitless. In this data-driven society, the anxiety and thirst of accumulating information, for instance, acquiring mass data from surveillance, does not necessarily produce new knowledge.² Technology, seemingly accelerating the process of these activities, drags us into the whirlpool in the flood of data collection. It is the interpretation of information that is more valuable. In the vast data sea, ScareMail wittily constructs a vessel of irony, striving for insignificant yet meaningful opportunities to seize our privacy from the government's hands and shifting our passive roles under surveillance into active defenders of our own data. This type of actions initiated by artists is very necessary and critical opposed to the government's legalization of public surveillance that has recently moved forward at a rapid pace.

The legalizing process of mass surveillance has been progressed by several milestones including Watergate scandal (1970s), 9/11 (2001) and Snowden (2013).³ Whistleblowing indeed has exposed government's permeating surveillant actions to the public, however, from another angle it as well has provoked the government to write these actions into law. After Watergate, Congress has passed FISA, or Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, to monitor suspected

² Han, The Transparency Society.

³ "Mass Surveillance in America: A Timeline of Loosening Laws and Practices."

espionage with digital surveillance and physical search. As a result of 9/11, Patriot Act, an extension of FISA, grants the FBI to request FISA for search of any “tangible” evidence, such as texts, phone calls, emails, bank documents, etc, of potentially international spy activities. Patriot Act has been extended and signed into law in 2006 under Bush administration. Responding to Snowden’s leak on PRISM, NSA’s mass surveillance on public through complicit technology companies including Apple, Facebook, Youtube, etc, CISA, Cybersecurity Intelligence Sharing Act, was signed into law by Obama administration in December, 2015. CISA empowers technology manufacturing companies to share internet traffic and user information with seven government agencies including NSA.⁴

Not only the concept of ScareMail has been cautiously tailored to reflect on its social background, the formal decisions are also closely tied in with the concept. The medium of ScareMail does not involve much aesthetic decisions, which may become distractions from the compelling concept. Words, as the only elements in this project, emphasize the initial intention of the work - the ambiguous meaning of security-sensitive vocabularies. In addition, the reference text of the generated stories alludes to the prophecy in fictional literature that has predicted surveillance long before our digital life has started. The original text for the generated story segments, Fahrenheit 451, depicts a dystopian society in the future where all books are outlawed because of the belief that books have no meanings or values and are replaced by TV shows and other media that expedites information consumption. The Mechanical Hound, “an eight-legged glass and metal contraption”, is a surveillance tool to help the firemen track down suspected book readers.⁵ The predictive censorship in the novel is an analogy of the limitations for the

⁴ “Congress Slips CISA Into a Budget Bill That’s Sure to Pass.”

⁵ de Koster, Katie, Readings on Fahrenheit 451, 32.

freedom of words as the products of surveillance. Dangerous words do not necessarily mean dangerous intentions. Surveillance should not restrict intellectual thoughts and celebrate self-censorship. The implicit literary reference directs to an explicit advocacy on privacy and freedom.

Although compared with those potent actions from the government, the public's effort, especially the art world's effort, seems limited and insignificant. In the view-from-above nature of surveillance, the public is often forced to play the roles of survivors eluding from the invasive eyes. Accordingly, artworks on surveillance and privacy are often based on our surviving conditions. Artist Adam Harvey creates Anti-Drone garments and CV Dazzle to camouflage from drone cameras and computer facial recognition tools respectively. Zach Blas' Face Cage is a series of 3d-printed masks in the shapes of facial wireframes used in facial recognition softwares. Wearing these masks, the wearers' faces become unrecognizable by cameras. However, ScareMail refuses the idea of "hiding", openly questioning the effectiveness of the government's approaches of antiterrorism at the expense of the vulnerability of personal privacy. Even though ScareMail is in an ideal state of resistance to surveillance after all, it evokes the notion that the single force from every individual can make a difference on the long revolutionary road of constructing a more balanced society with less surveillance or power struggle.

Grosser has kept his code of ScareMail open-sourced to any online contributions. If the government keeps their actions on surveillance confidential and mysterious, then the public takes the stand on the other side of the spectrum to keep any related information open. Under such circumstances, artists are practitioners to use these information for the exploration of new vehicles to defend privacy.