

Analysis on Dark Patterns

There is a long history of using physical infrastructures as metaphors for intangible ideas and virtual environments. The classic example of panopticon's strictly organized structure embodies the one-directional overseeing in Foucault's theories in surveillance. And more recently, Allison Parish has given a presentation at South by Southwest about her interpretation of the purposes of Twitter bots for our time. She claims that Twitter bots are not absolutely good or bad, but instead using an analogy of Twitter bots and skateboarding. As skateboarding often wanders in the grey area of legal enforcement in the usage of physical infrastructures, Twitter bots explores undiscovered or overlooked purposes of the internet. The intangibility of the internet has induced a large amount of explorations that are not possible in physical environment, but meanwhile, has caused confusion and uncertainty of what our experience with the internet actually is. Tyler Coburn in his article My Life in the Cloud calls this uncertainty "semiotic anxieties" (of the life in the cloud). Are we inside of the cloud or outside of the cloud? How has our life changed since the existence of the cloud? What are the implications for us? Unlike our intrinsic reactions to tangible objects, the connotations of digital life remain floating just like the clouds in the sky constantly shifting their shapes.

Projects on visualizing or even spatializing the internet have mostly intended to extract the mechanisms and flows of the internet, creating nodes, nets and multi-dimensional 3d models that we usually see in hypothetical models of physics. Those projects strip off the complications of the internet to show us the skeletons of how our digital life operates on daily basis. Rather than simplifying the very abstract concept of the internet, another approach takes the direction on the physical infrastructures that actually make the internet possible. Trevor Paglen has long been working on his photography series of taking pictures of fiber cables in the deep sea, data centers, etc. Ingrid Burrington is releasing a new book on the hidden

infrastructures of the internet in New York City: marks left on old buildings, covering of manholes, FBI offices in familiar buildings that we are never aware of.

Signs and instructions are seen everywhere on buildings, public space, every corner of the city. They denote straightforward messages of how to use the physical space “correctly” - the simple rules to obey. To find the digital counterparts of those signs and instructions, EULA (end user license agreement, or terms and conditions), and more obviously, the seemingly user-friendly interfaces, carry the same type of purposes but sit on the other side of the spectrum of being straightforward. EULAs often appear to be not only long and tedious to read but also ambiguous or impossible to understand the legal implications. Many user interfaces trick users for certain behaviors towards marketing profits, from subscribing to mailing lists to mining browsing habits that users can't even opt out.

For the hidden consequences of the invasion of our privacy in these EULAs and user interfaces, Dark Patterns is an online aggregation analyzing those phenomena across platforms: social media, spams, ads, etc. The website owners and volunteers post their discoveries of evil user interfaces and share their thoughts under different categories, such as disguised ads, hidden costs, trick questions, and one called “Privacy Zuckering”, which explains how Facebook's privacy user interface is designed to be intentionally complex, so that users are more likely to share their information with a broader audience. To change one's privacy setting, the user has to go to “Customize Settings” under “Privacy Setting”, and each type of information: posts, family, education, etc, has its own privacy level options. There is no easy way to adjust the privacy setting for all of them at once but going through each of them one by one and changing the options. After the analysis of the existing interface, Dark Patterns also provides their ideal solution, a mock up of a much more convenient dropdown box and a slider to change the settings of all information at once.

Although Dark Patterns is an open platform for discussion on these interesting topics, it is also out of date since 2010, since it's only maintained by a small group of people and lack of submissions from volunteers. The impact of platforms like Dark Patterns is limited; actions should be initiated from the marketers who should at least give users the options to opt out on data tracking.