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New ways of hiding: towards metainterface realism

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Abstract

Interfaces have a history of realism as attempts to map, represent and interact with reality. However, recent changes in the interface, including both the way we understand, use, design and build interfaces, merits a new discussion of its realism. The contemporary interface is both omnipresent and invisible, at once integrated into everyday objects and characterised by hidden exchanges of information between objects. With the current spread of mobile devices, embedded sensors, cloud services, and data capture, a new interface paradigm, the metainterface, arises where data and software disappear from our devices and into the global cloud. The metainterface indicates that the interface has become more abstract, generalised, but also spatialised in the sense of being ubiquitous, mobile, urban and related to the things of our environment. The metainterface as a concept, industry and art/design practice calls for a new kind of realism which combines what you see (e.g. the data, tools, operations, transactions) with how you see it (the metainterface and its software, networks and executions), including how it sees you (how the user/users are captured, datafied, profiled, computed and 'executed'). In other ways we need a 'way of seeing' that goes beyond the visual and integrates the metainterface and its

effects. Currently these effects can be seen as two ways of hiding: 1) Minimalist hiding, e.g. the hiding of the datafication, monitoring and profiling going on in cloud computing infrastructures behind its immediate, minimalist user-interface. 2) Environmental hiding, including hiding its mode of control as smart for example. These dimensions are often combined but can be investigated in workshops for metainterface realism. This article will discuss these options by looking at art that explores and produces alternatives to this seeming disappearance by the artists Ben Grosser, Joana Moll, James Bridle, EL Putnam and workshops by Joana Moll and the authors et al.

Keywords

realism, metainterface, interface criticism, critical theory, the design of transparency

Nuevas formas de ocultarse: hacia el realismo de la metainterfaz

Resumen

Las interfaces tienen un historial de realismo, ya que son intentos de cartografiar, representar e interactuar con la realidad. Sin embargo, cambios recientes en la interfaz, que incluyen la manera en que entendemos, usamos, diseñamos y construimos interfaces, han provocado un nuevo análisis de este realismo. La interfaz contemporánea es omnipresente e invisible, se integra en los objetos cotidianos y se caracteriza por intercambios escondidos de información entre objetos. Con la difusión actual de los dispositivos móviles, sensores incrustados, servicios en la nube y captación de datos, surge un nuevo paradigma de interfaz, la metainterfaz, donde los datos y el software desaparecen de nuestros dispositivos en la nube global. La metainterfaz indica que la interfaz se ha vuelto más abstracta, generalizada, pero también espacializada en el sentido de que es ubicua, móvil, urbana y que se relaciona con nuestro entorno. La metainterfaz como concepto, práctica artística, de diseño o industrial, reclama un nuevo tipo de realismo que combine lo que se ve (por ejemplo, datos, herramientas, operaciones y transacciones) con cómo se ve (la metainterfaz y su software, redes y ejecuciones) y con cómo se nos ve (cómo se capta, trata los datos, elabora el perfil, computa o «ejecuta» al usuario o usuarios). En otro sentido, necesitamos una «forma de ver» que vaya más allá de lo visual y que integre la metainterfaz y sus repercusiones. De hecho, estas repercusiones se pueden ver como dos formas de ocultarse: 1) la ocultación minimalista, por ejemplo, ocultar el procesamiento de datos, monitorización y elaboración del perfil que se desarrollan en infraestructuras informáticas en la nube detrás de la interfaz de usuario minimalista e inmediata; y 2) la ocultación del entorno, que incluye ocultar su modo de control como inteligente, por ejemplo. Estas dimensiones a veces se combinan, pero se pueden investigar en talleres de realismo de la metainterfaz. Este artículo analizará estas opciones centrándose en el arte que explora y produce alternativas a esta aparente desaparición por parte de los artistas Ben Grosser, Joana Moll, James Bridle, E. L. Putnam, y los talleres de Joana Moll y otros.

Palabras clave

realismo, metainterfaz, crítica de la interfaz, teoría crítica, el diseño de la transparencia

Introduction

Interfaces have a history of pursuing realism through attempting to map, represent and interact with reality. The history of interface development contains numerous examples of rhetorical claims and attempts at building natural, intuitive, hidden and invisible interfaces. As argued in Pold (2005), realism for the interface draws on an engineering tradition that aspires to make itself disappear in the name of an ideal of “transparency” where the interface will itself disappear seamlessly into work-related activities. However, recent changes in the interface – including in how we understand, use, design and build interfaces – necessitate a renewed discussion of what form its realism might take. This discussion is the topic of this article. The current emergence of what has been described as a new interface paradigm – the metainterface – makes this all the more important (Andersen and Pold 2018). The metainterface paradigm currently aims to be both omnipresent and invisible, at once integrated into everyday objects and at the same time characterised by hidden exchanges of information. As mobile and specialised devices, embedded sensors, cloud services and data capture reach ever further into every aspect of citizens’ lives, a metainterface is emerging in which data and software disappear from our devices into the global cloud. The arrival of the metainterface shows that the interface has become more abstract, generalised, but at the same time spatialised in the sense that it is ubiquitous, mobile, urban, embedded and related to our environment.

Layers of the metainterface and reality increasingly overlap through assemblages of software and infrastructure. For a citizen in a technological society, the general way of perception is now surrounded by and interlaced with the metainterface in its many different dimensions. This interfacing is both voluntary, in the sense that it is something we choose, for example by subscribing to a service, and involuntary, as with the hidden tracking of our movement through sensors. Even in the case of voluntarily agreeing to terms of service, the extent to which a user is tracked is often effectively involuntary, simply because these terms are not legible to ordinary people and users do not realise how much data is being gathered, not only on the platforms themselves but also outside them through cookies, pixel tags, ultrasound beacons, browser fingerprinting and so on. In many cases this tracking is related to manipulative practices that tempt the user with an especially attractive option, for example through the use of “dark pattern design”, which apart from its immediate function has been designed to harvest further indication of choices and values for profiling, a practice that Shoshana Zuboff has characterised as surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2015).

Realisms

As a concept, industry, and art/design practice, the metainterface calls for a new discussion of realism – one that combines what you see (data, tools, operations, transactions) with how you see it (the metainterface and its software, networks and executions) and with how it sees you (how users are captured, datafied, profiled, computed and ‘executed’). When we listen to music and watch video on YouTube, the metainterface (a.k.a. Google) is not just profiling us to give us more of what we like; it is also mapping our taste and thus refining its profiling. In this sense there is a feedback loop, because the content that is recommended to users is already based on their profile and it is shaping what is seen, which is in turn used to adjust the profile. Cultural consumption on streaming platforms is an important medium for this profiling of taste.

How can we understand this gradual but integral change in how the metainterface relates to – and becomes part of – the real? This article will present a critical realism for the metainterface: not a realism that aims to render the metainterface invisible or intuitive and thus remove it from the domain of perception, but rather a critical realism that aims to develop a way of seeing and sensing that goes beyond the visual surface and integrates a literacy of the functional and data dimensions of the metainterface – in other words, a critical realism that aims at a combination of visual and data realism. Rather than the trendy “speculative realism” amply criticised by Galloway (2013) in relation to software studies, this article instead looks for inspiration to the classical realist tradition, its reflection on its own production and its historical exploration of how visual media, bureaucracy and statistics changed our view on, and production of, urban modernity (Lukács 1965; Pold 2000). The article also integrates perspectives from software studies and critical design. In relation to software studies, metainterfaces and design, the article continues to build on Walter Benjamin’s concept of “tendency” (“Tendenz”) and on the Scandinavian tradition of participatory design explored in earlier work (Andersen and Pold 2018). Furthermore, a metainterface realism should question how bodies and gender are constructed and enclosed by metainterfaces. For this, Donna Haraway’s notion of “feminist objectivity” and “situated knowledges” has to be addressed, going against ideas of passive vision in order to explore through “active perceptual systems” and “ways of seeing”. As Haraway states: “Understanding how these visual systems work, technically, socially, and psychically, ought to be a way of embodying feminist objectivity” (Haraway 1988, 583).¹ This article will search for a realism which, rather than seeking intuitive seamlessness, aims to explore what you see, how

1. Haraway’s approach fits with this article’s call for a metainterface realism that can explore technical and situated ways of seeing, though she explicitly dissociates herself from a “version of realism” that has been a “poor way of engaging with the world’s active agency” (Haraway 1988, 593). Regarding technofeminist praxis, see also Cornelia Sollfrank (Sollfrank 2018). The English translation of her introduction can be found here: <https://transversal.at/blog/the-beautiful-warriors>.

you see it, and how the metainterface sees you – including how it structures what it is seeing.

The ultimate goal of this realism is to develop a critical literacy that we can use to design less manipulative metainterfaces. Carl DiSalvo applies Latour's theory of "matter of concern" to interaction design as a form of realist critical design that can "give form to controversy" in ways that do not reduce it to "solutionism". The problem is that

when design does engage controversy, (...) it often tries to remove, or "design away", the controversial qualities of a situation, or to mitigate them in ways that render the situation less problematic. This has the effect of stifling the potential of design and this new mode of critique (DiSalvo 2018, 478, 481).

We already see numerous examples of the loss of trust in commercial metainterfaces that are increasingly becoming corrupted by their business model of profiling and exploiting user data and profiles. Zuboff (2015) has characterised this as "surveillance capitalism". Users increasingly react by installing blockers, deleting cookies and apps, using more than one browser, and so on. Even if some of these attempts are ineffectual, they demonstrate a growing distrust and diminishing engagement in interactions. These kinds of metainterfaces are gradually being reduced from reflective writing and reading environments that afford interpretative, expressive and social modes of reception and interaction to something more like cognitive behavioural tracking through clickbait, "likes" and surveillance. The Facebooks and Googles of the world do not care much for what you write and read, but rather that you click and click again, trapped within their walled gardens and tracked for data extraction (Grosser 2014).

Metainterface realism means exploring how the metainterface by design aspires to stay increasingly hidden and integrated into the real. The metainterface seems to have two ways of hiding. The first is minimalist hiding: for example, hiding the datafication, monitoring and profiling that is going on in cloud computing infrastructures behind its immediate, minimalist user interface. The second is environmental hiding, where interface elements become invisibly embedded in the environment and the mode of control is also hidden – for example when they are characterised as "smart". These dimensions are often combined in artworks, but workshops are also a way of investigating and understanding the realism of the metainterface, as this article will show towards the end. In what follows, this article will discuss these ways of hiding by looking at art that explores and produces alternatives to this seeming disappearance.

Minimalist hiding

When Google's search engine became popular in the early 2000s, it was famous for its efficiency, mirrored by a minimalist design that

left out all ads and so on and kept just the simple logo and the search bar. This minimalist design quickly became a trademark for web 2.0 services, in which the web was constructed as a hyperstructure of links and sites originally carried out by the users and designers which has since been taken over by services such as Facebook and Twitter and their systems of "friends", followers, shares and retweets. The minimalist web design at first appeared more candid to users who were tired of ads and overloaded website portals, but gradually it came to hide a new metainterface industry behind its simple interface. Users were placed "in front of dumb terminals, feeding centralized databases" (Lialina and Espenschied 2009, 11).

We still do not know the full extent of the social media companies' connivance in selling user information for covert and illegal voter manipulation in the 2016 UK Brexit referendum and the 2016 US election. However, it has become evident enough that this apparent candour disguised the fact that the manipulation was now less visible to the user, unfolding as it now does behind the immediate surface of the screen. The new rhetoric and aesthetics of the web 2.0 metainterface seem to involve hiding data manipulation behind a minimal interface of simple buttons and templates that in fact control the user. Metainterfaces are not just interfaces for executing computational scripts, but also to a networked production of data extracted from user behaviour. When you click Facebook's "reactions", you are not only "liking" your friends' posts, you are also indicating your values and network to Facebook in a template that was designed in order to create profiles. As argued by the American artist, Ben Grosser, Facebook is driven by quantification. It is this that has led to its current problems with propagating the sensational and the spectacular, clickbait regardless of its truth. Facebook is so dependent on this quantification model that it cannot find a way out of its abusive practices. It has no choice but to continue to patch it with even more quantification tools, thus staying with their economic model of "surveillance capitalism":

Facebook can try and patch it all they want (with content moderation, News Feed algorithm tweaks, reputation metrics, etc.), but I would argue that any alternative requires a radical transformation, one that isn't dependent on quantification or endless growth (Campbell-Dollaghan 2018).

As an artistic answer to the question of what it would take to make Facebook safe, Grosser has created *Safebook* (Grosser 2018) as a follow-up to other works on Facebook like *Facebook Demetricator* and *Go Rando*. *Safebook* is a browser extension that hides all Facebook content, including images, text, video and audio without interrupting the functionality: users can still add friends, comment and "like", only without being able to see who or what they are interacting with. This might seem absurd, but it also indicates that we know Facebook's interface well enough to interact with it even blindly. The social media interface is standardised as a template to the extent that we do not

Image 1. Ben Grosser: *Safebook*. 2018

even need to see it anymore. The reason is obviously to maximise user activity and engagement and to harvest standardised behavioural data that can be used effectively for profiling, but it also raises the question whether the content really matters or not, as long as it can be tracked (Grosser 2014).

We even to some extent plan and understand our activities so that they fit social media templates and infrastructures, from running with fitness trackers to going to Facebook events, even accommodating our public discussion in Twitter-friendly one-liners. As Philip E. Agre stated in his influential and still highly relevant article on “Surveillance and Capture”:

[Indeed,] it is crucial to appreciate the senses in which the imposition and instrumentation phases constitute a reorganisation of the existing activity, as opposed to simply a representation of it (Ayre 2003, 747).

Following this, the notable aspects of capture are not only the increasing harvesting of data, the profiling it leads to and the misuse of this data economy for manipulative purposes. There are also the many minuscule ways in which we organise our activities so they will fit into the templates and models for capturing: we instantiate and operate through what Agre describes as “grammars of action”. In other words, before social media, we didn’t “like” our “friends” activities or post our own activities and small thoughts online – until we reorganised our daily activities so that they would fit the quantification metrics and templates of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

As a user of *Safebook* one feels like a worker on an absurd production line, producing signals for a strangely alienating machine by pushing buttons, choosing menus and writing input. But when the *Safebook* extension is switched off again, one cannot escape the impression that this ghostly machine is still there, beyond the apparent content on the surface. On his own website, Grosser asks “is complete removal of all content the only way a social media network can be ‘safe’?”. As we ponder this question, *Safebook* at least shows us that removing content is a way of showing us a personal interface

view of the machinery of Facebook without content and friends getting in the way. *Safebook* does not show the details of how Facebook handles or uses data to generate the individual user's timeline; rather, it demonstrates the abstract syntax of the Facebook interface and how it works to capture user behaviour. It shows us how to see the quantification machine behind the content of the interface, but it also forces on us a glimpse of how this machine is at work in our daily life through interfacing "grammars of action".

Whereas *Safebook* mainly explores the human side of the activities created by the quantification metainterface, Joana Moll's

[illegible]

Image 2. Joana Moll: *Algorithms Allowed*, 2017

Algorithms Allowed looks deeper into the technical and networked side of the interface. The project tracks, explores and thus ostensibly aims to reverse trackers, the abundant small pieces of software within a website that monitor user behaviour. Moll looks particularly for trackers from US-based companies on websites from countries against which the United States imposes embargoes, such as Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Syria and the Ukrainian region of Crimea. The *Algorithms Allowed* webpage concretely shows a number of US trackers from Facebook Connect, Google Analytics and Google Fonts on websites in these countries, apparently working and connecting to Google and Facebook despite the US embargo, with screenshots of the websites and code. Nevertheless, Moll's own attempt to sell a Google tracker that she found on the official webpage of North Korea through eBay was immediately banned by a bot "in charge of enforcing US policy" (Moll 2017). Besides showing how the tracking infrastructures of US companies apparently override embargo policies in their attempt at global dominance, Moll's project also shows that not even potential communist or Muslim visitors to a North Korean, Cuban or Iranian website can escape the targeting and tracking of the US corporate metainterface industry, working just beneath its surface and content. Yet, as demonstrated by the project, an artist who tries to reverse the tracking and sell the tracker that is extracting economic value by tracking users will be stopped by other bots.

Consequently, these two projects – *Algorithms Allowed* and *Safebook* – demonstrate the often-hidden mechanisms of quantification in metainterfaces, how they work on and between websites, and how they form active templates that organise and reorganise activities and daily life as "grammar of action" through data manipulation behind a minimal interface. Obviously, there is much more to say about the mechanisms and effects of such a "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2015) and how it has become a new cultural metainterface industry (Andersen and Pold 2018, chapter 2).

Image 3. James Bridle: *Autonomous Trap 001*, 2017

However, the point here is to address this phenomenon as a realism, as a way of seeing and constructing the world, while hiding the data extraction and user manipulation behind a sleek minimalist interface.

Environmental hiding

Metainterfaces are not only signposting the tendency to hide datafying and profiling infrastructures behind minimalist design on screens. Some aspects of interface design for the environment seem to aim for automatisisation to the extent where interface elements become invisibly embedded in the environment through sensor and surveillance technologies. An example is the development of elements of smart cities such as so-called intelligent infrastructure and autonomous cars. As demonstrated by James Bridle's simple and effective artwork *Autonomous Trap 001* (2017), autonomous cars rely on unequivocal traffic rules and signage that can be seen and read by machine vision and GPS (Bridle 2017). However, unequivocal traffic rules are often interpreted and bent, and the signage varies. In *Autonomous Trap 001* a salt circle is made with an outer broken line and an inner solid line, which means that according to traffic rules an autonomous car may enter but not exit the circle. Of course, there might be ways for neural networks to get out of this trap, but the artwork is making the point that traffic signs and rules are a language that humans speak too, and that we might change signs to disrupt traffic or simply to experiment with the ways that robotic entities like autonomous cars see, interpret and react. Instead of the never-ending discussions about the ethics of driving algorithms and the trolley problem, *Autonomous Trap 001* asks a simpler aesthetic and material question about the realism of the autonomous car interface. It provokes the car interface in order to show its internal logics, its way of seeing and driving; and it asks questions about how we might react as active citizens to a future reality with conflicts between humans and autonomous cars.

Another project by James Bridle exploring the aesthetics of urban interfaces is his *Diorama (for Louis Daguerre)* (Bridle 2016). This digital video is shot in Paris at the Boulevard du Temple, on the location of

Image 4. James Bridle: *Diorama (for Louis Daguerre)*, 2016

a daguerreotype taken by Daguerre in 1838. That daguerreotype was famous for being the earliest surviving photograph showing people – a person getting his boots polished and the worker shining his shoes. It was taken at 8 a.m., and while the streets would have been busy, only people staying immobile long enough for the seven-minute exposure are visible in the daguerreotype. In his video, made almost two hundred years later, Bridle has reversed contemporary software designed to track objects that move to get a similar effect, gradually removing all moving persons, leaving only individuals who remain motionless – who appear to be homeless individuals. These individuals are sitting at a monument in Place de la République in front of statues ironically dedicated to liberty, equality and fraternity. *Diorama (for Louis Daguerre)* in this way wittily demonstrates who inhabits and is seen and monitored by urban security interfaces at a monument created in homage of the political republican values, and we are left to reflect on whether these values still count in the age of urban metainterfaces. Apart from reflecting on the topicality of (French) republican values, by repeating the daguerreotype's effect of slow exposure Bridle also reflects on visual camera technology and how it has developed from just being able to record humans who remain motionless to a situation where cameras can sense, record and control human movement.

Not only cities, but borders too are controlled by interfaces and infrastructures. Joana Moll's *The Virtual Watchers* project (Moll 2016b) focuses on how volunteers use a Facebook group to monitor the US–Mexican border through open CCTV footage. The project foregrounds the interface assemblages of CCTV, social network communication and collaboration to control a border. As Moll presents the project, “it highlights to what extent the emotional investment and exchanges of these people work as an essential mechanism in the construction and legitimisation of a post-panoptic system” (Moll 2016b). The project portrays the Facebook group as akin to an online multiplayer game: the audience watches the cameras, discusses observations in the group, and adds their own (mainly right-wing) political comments. As one of the watchers comments in the middle of a long discussion of the cameras and what they are showing, “I used to be Addicted!” [sic] (Moll 2016b, 27 October 2011, 23:04). The project points to how assemblages of technology and networked communication inform specific discursive spaces composed of people from many different locations in the United States (many of them not near the border, as the map of the watchers' locations shows) that might form the basis of political formation and maybe even for a demand to create a border wall. We see that the technologies of CCTV and Facebook do not act automatically or alone, but through their assemblage and integration into a political and discursive formation that they may be

helping to amplify. In analysing the *Virtual Watchers* we can study another example of Agre's “grammar of action” – including people asking for “elaboration of it” (“we need some way to alert the border patrol, police, or Sheriff our selves” [sic] (Moll 2016b, 29. January 2011, 21:00) (Agre 2003, 746–747) – and how this grammar is integrated into and informs a political discourse.²

Image 5: Joana Moll: *The Virtual Watchers*, 2016

2. “Elaboration” is one Agre's five stages in the imposition of grammars of action upon human activities (analysis, articulation, imposition, instrumentation, elaboration) (Agre 2003, 746–747). One of Agre's main points is a distinction between surveillance and capture, which builds respectively on visual and linguistic metaphors. *The Virtual Watchers* might be seen as mainly visual surveillance, but through the Facebook group discussion it also integrates linguistic dimensions that are relevant to the discussion through the concept of capture.

Image 6. EL Putnam: *Quickening*, 2018

Another heavily discussed border is the one between Northern Ireland and Ireland. This border was enforced by military and police during the years of the Troubles, from the late 1960s until the peace process thirty years later gradually kicked in. This led to a situation where currently (as of July 2019) the border is almost invisible except for the changes in traffic signage and currency. Yet the border is still there, and at the time of writing its future status is an important part of the discussion of Brexit, when (or if) the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland) leaves the European single market and customs union. As a way of exploring her relationship with this currently invisible border, the artist and scholar EL (Emily Lauren) Putnam has made the interactive digital performance *Quickening*, which through its title relates images and sounds from the landscape of the invisible border to the quickening of early pregnancy when the mother feels the movement of the foetus before the pregnancy is visible to others. *Quickening* is installed on a large TV screen with a motion sensor that monitors the space in front of the screen, and when a viewer gets near the screen, the video and sound are glitched and stitched with other sound and video cuts from the border landscape. As Putnam explains, the border is experienced affectively, and “the ramifications of Brexit are experienced through a quickening that is tied to remnants of the border’s past while the outcome of which has yet to be manifest” (Putnam 2018).

Quickening points to the presence of human and gendered bodies in the border landscape, in particular pregnant women who might have to cross the border or leave Ireland altogether to get an abortion. Yet it also points to a potential and imagined future after Brexit, where a “smart” border of digital surveillance is envisioned as a way of making a “hard” border *feel* “soft”. Though the border is currently invisible, that invisibility and how it is felt and experienced depend on political agreements and how they might be carried out through technological and administrative infrastructure. In continuation of

Bridle’s exploration of technological sensation and Moll’s exploration of how technology informs a political discourse, it is worth noticing *Quickening*’s exploration of the (in-)visibility of technological infrastructure and how this is potentially experienced affectively and felt by susceptible individuals. Consequently, *Quickening* can be seen as an allegory for the environmental hiding of the metainterface, including how it potentially controls humans, bodies and gender. One could argue, with Haraway, that Putnam is exploring feminist objectivity through a “subjugated standpoint”. As Haraway points out, “*how* to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the ‘highest’ technoscientific visualizations” (Haraway 1988, 584). Putnam in this way explores the Irish border during Brexit from below and from an embodied, feminist perspective.

When the borders and control interfaces become invisible and “soft”, they may lose the user dimension of being readable and subject to interactive manipulation, but they do not disappear from experience or lose the aspects of control. Rather, they become individualised and internalised – apart from the still-functional control. Having been readable before, the control interface now reads the user, and users

Images 7 and 8. Joana Moll: “Poetic Deconstruction of the Interface”, workshop, 2016

might gradually start to feel this, especially if they are subject to it and/or are not included in the production process of the algorithms and software (for example, if they are not white men) (Whittaker et al. 2018, 37 ff).

Workshops towards metainterface realism

As these examples point out, the ideal for metainterface designers of hiding within the interface or hiding the interface are problematic, and often manipulative. We need better ways to understand and negotiate the realisms of the metainterface. This article concludes by signposting strategies to accomplish this. Workshops like the “Poetic Deconstruction of the Interface” (Moll 2016a, image 7) aim to critically reveal, deconstruct and rearticulate the infrastructure, design and ideology of global interfaces through artistic exploration and design. In the workshop, participants create maps of the internet. With these they can visualise the invisible infrastructures of the internet – the cables, the data centres, the environmental impact, the CO₂ emissions and so on. Furthermore, they deconstruct or hack popular websites as a strategy to explore the interface design. Finally, they rearticulate interface design and ideology, both through exploring tracking and by making cardboard masks of specific interface templates and overlaying them on others (e.g. Google on top of Facebook, see image 8). Workshops like this work specifically with how elements of interfaces are hidden, both in our environment and in user interfaces. They explore ways of critically discovering and rearticulating the interface.

Image 9. *Instant Kafé*, 2012

Another example of a workshop is the *Instant Kafé* event, which took place in 2012 at the main public library in Aarhus as a mobile talk show around a Talkaoke table (developed by the London artist collective The

People Speak) equipped with cameras, sensors and a video screen showing partly real, partly fictional data from the conversation table, collected through video and sensor-equipped coffee mugs (Andersen et al. 2012). As part of the event, all participants were asked to sign printed terms-of-service contracts, sampled and copied from various social media platforms, in order to get free coffee. In 2012 the problems of social media were still largely unknown to the general public, there was a lot less knowledge of their terms of service, and many visitors resisted signing, which led to discussions about data tracking and profiling around the table. These discussions were further sparked by the fact that next to us a group of people interested in genealogy had gathered and were considering what data collecting by social media would mean for the future of genealogy, including how they could get access to closed-data gatherings. In this way, *Instant Kafé* became an attempt to bring the largely invisible business model of social media into an established and important public space, the city library, in order to discuss the ramifications of social media models for public space –including how it works through data tracking, profiling, and the offer of tempting models of “free” usage. *Instant Kafé* conceptually mapped models of the public to models of social media, including social media’s monitoring and profiling strategies, terms of use and business model. In this way, it opened a way to discuss strategies of the metainterface by exploring its own model.

Image 10. *Instant Kafé*, 2012

Approaches such as these artistic explorations are necessary as a way to understand, experience, and create alternatives to current metainterfaces. As shown by the “Poetic Deconstruction of the Interface” workshop, and other similar attempts to map and discover hidden infrastructures, there is an interest out there in material environmental infrastructure.³ Furthermore, *Instant Kafé* made visible that there is also a shared interest in social media’s data collection

3. See also the work of Paul O'Neill, including his “C-Node: A Tour of Dublin’s Internet and Corporate Tech Infrastructures” (2018) and (O'Neill 2018) See also (Hu 2015).

(which, as argued above, is hidden behind minimalist interfaces) and in how such data could alternatively be used for the commons – for example as a library – if it were not locked away behind corporate walls and APIs. There is a growing need for a different metainterface that includes new ways to reflect on the dimensions and transformations of the environment and data collection. A realism is needed, but one that, rather than hiding, emphasises seeing, reading and understanding in order to create less manipulative and more trustworthy and open metainterfaces – metainterfaces that can be used openly by individuals and the public to navigate a complex, computational culture, without having to subscribe to the monitoring and business schemes by a corporate metainterface industry owned by Google, Facebook etc.

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