

## **Net gain/net loss: the Googlization of new media art in the era of neoliberalism**

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As Internet technology and access has improved exponentially over the past two decades, there has been a global influx of new media artists using the Internet as a primary venue for exhibiting, distributing, and collaboratively authoring digital artwork. Many new media artists have turned to the Internet and alternative copyright schemes in an effort to embrace open source media content and production while distancing themselves and their work from commercialization. These practices have resulted in the popular myth that the Internet exists as an autonomous venue for creative work that is uninhibited by government regulation, commercialization, private interests, and economic policy. Drawing on the context of neoliberal practices, this paper analyses the Internet search engine giant Google and its function as an inhibitor to the dissemination of noncommercial, open source new media art. Netlabels are specifically addressed as an exemplification of new media art that has become marginalized by the Internet search techniques developed and employed by Google, which often favour advertisers and revenue over autonomous authorship and the public interest.

### **Neoliberalism and Googlization**

Robert McChesney defines neoliberalism as 'the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit' (1999: 7). One of the most illustrative and influential policies contributing to the decrease in the number of these private interests within the United States was the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which significantly deregulated the media industry and resulted in an era of major media consolidation and homogenization. McChesney argues that neoliberalism exists in opposition to noncommercial entities, which allows it to operate 'not only as an economic system, but as a political and cultural system as well (ibid: 9). In other words, as there become fewer privatized media companies, these companies work in

tandem with political forces to ensure that their interests are protected, thus preserving and reinforcing their grasp on the production and dissemination of culture. In a sense, this is the realization of what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as the culture industry. They argue that, 'films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part', leading to a homogenized and standardized media industry that meets the entertainment desires of a large, generalized audience (1993: 1). Thus, instead of promoting public knowledge and discourse, the culture industry breeds imaginary needs in the mind of the mass audience or, more appropriately, in the mind of the consumer. Google's far reaching role in the ranking, categorization, and cataloguing of information on the Internet renders the company a new and powerful player in the culture industry, which raises important questions about who actually benefits from Google's services.

But why does Google deserve such scrutiny when there are so many competing search engines to choose from? In short, because Google continues to dominate the Internet search engine domain on a global scale, and the results returned by a Google search affect the *quality* of the experience of the average Internet user (Jarboe 2007). In other words, an Internet search conducted through Google will return results engineered specifically by Google and for Google. Considering that Google can potentially profit from sponsored search results and pay-per-click advertising, any artists' who makes their work available for free on the Internet must ask themselves whether Google is working for the good of the artist or the advertiser.

In a paper addressing the political economy of Internet search engines, Elizabeth Van Couvering compares Internet search engines to the 'large industrial players' of television and Hollywood, arguing that, besides functioning as search engines, the top four Internet companies (AOL, Yahoo!, Google, and Microsoft/MSN) also dominate Internet advertising and Internet culture (2004: 3). Since Van Couvering's paper was published, Google has emerged as the most used Internet search engine and Internet advertising now accounts for three-quarters of total U.S. ad revenue (Interactive Advertising Bureau). Google's purchase of YouTube further attests to the company's extended cultural reach. In fact, Google has been the top search engine since at least 2002 and will likely remain the most used search engine across the globe for the foreseeable future, especially considering that popular web browsers such as Safari and Firefox now embed an easily accessible Google search window into their interfaces (Interactive Advertising Bureau). This has ultimately

resulted in what has been termed the 'Googlization' of nearly every aspect of information available on the Internet.

But what exactly does the term Googlization mean and why did it surface? The term is most likely a combination of the words Google and 'globalization,' which came into popular use throughout the 1990s to describe the increasing connectedness of global economics, politics, communities, and cultures, due, in part, by the growth of Internet. Googlization, then, defines the dominance of Google over the cataloguing, distribution, and retrieval of information on the Internet. One of the earliest uses of the term came in 2003, when Alex Salkever referred to Googlization as the 'creeping' domination of Google over nearly all aspects of information on the Internet (2003: 1). A visit to the web site googlization.com brings up a single white page with bold type at the top, which asks the deceptively simple question, 'If I can't be Googled, do I exist?' (Anonymous: 2008). This question is an obvious reference to Descartes' famous statement 'I think, therefore I am', but it brings up important issues of individual identity and concepts of reality not unlike those raised by Lacan, who wrote 'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think' (1977: 166). Of course the question posed on googlization.com might have just as easily been written as the statement 'I can be Googled, therefore I am', but it is a question that must be asked by any artist using the Internet to distribute their work for non-commercial purposes.

For artists striving to obtain a level of autonomy and freedom from the commoditization of their art, the Internet at first appears to be the ideal exhibition venue. However, one can deposit as much artwork as one wants into vast data bank that is the Internet, but if the work can't be easily found using a search engine such as Google, there is virtually no audience to receive the work, which all but obliterates the purpose of using the Internet as an exhibition space and renders the work Googlized. Moreover, even if one's artwork manages to percolate to the top of a Google search – a nearly impossible task – that work is presented within a context of advertising and commercialization, thus rendering the work a commodity and further devaluing the work of the artist.

## **Copyright**

Another problem faced by new media artists working non-commercially is copyright. How does an artist retain authorship and control over their art once it is made available online, especially if the artist wishes to allow redistribution of the work or

derivative works to be made? Lawrence Lessig has frequently addressed the limitations imposed on artists by copyright law, arguing that the traditional means of controlling intellectual property are archaic and in need of revision, given what Manovich calls 'a valuable form of contemporary culture' created from 'the network-enabled process of collaboration, networking, and exchange' (2002: 2). In response to these perceived limitations, Lessig developed the first set of Creative Commons (CC) licenses, which were designed to offer artists an alternative to the restrictions of traditional copyright and afford them greater freedom to publish and distribute their work as they see fit. Traditional copyright assumes total control by the artist or author, hence barring anyone from legally expanding or sharing the work. While the concept of commons includes the idea that they are 'institutional spaces, in which we can practice a particular type of freedom', there is a tendency to think of these spaces as free markets, when in fact there exist 'structured relationships intended to elicit a particular datum – the comparative willingness and ability of agents to pay money for resource' (Benkler 2003: 6).

### **Labelling netlabels**

Perhaps the most illustrative example of non-commercial, open source Internet culture and the Google gate-keeping effect comes in the form of independent online record labels (netlabels) and the music they catalogue and distribute. Ever since the Napster debacle, there has been a very serious fear in the music industry that peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing will severely damage the profitability of traditional music publishing and distribution. There exists rampant paranoia in the music industry that any free exchange of music on the Internet will result in the economic downfall of the increasingly few major record labels. Perhaps one of the consequences of this paranoia is the lack of a specific audio or music search on the Google homepage, especially given the volume of takedown notices the RIAA has issued to YouTube since its purchase by Google. Moreover, legislation such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act is a result of music industry lobbyists working with political forces to protect their private interests – not the interests of the public.

However, a careful analysis of the true function and intention of netlabels renders these industry fears unfounded. Bram Timmers notes that netlabels do not redistribute popular copyrighted music, thus setting them apart from the common conception of P2P file sharing networks like Napster and Kazaa that knowingly redistributed copyrighted material (2005: 8). Michel Bauwens further establishes this

difference when he writes 'P2P does not refer to all behavior or processes that takes place in distributed networks: P2P specifically designates those processes that aim to increase the most widespread participation by equipotential participants' (2005: 1). In other words, P2P is not only about illegal file sharing as defined by the music industry, it is the process of increased cultural communication.

According to Timmers, netlabels serve a large community of independent sound artists and musicians whose work is usually not distributed through conventional record labels, and he notes that every step of the process is executed using the Internet (2005: 9). Once an artist produces an audio work, it is uploaded to the netlabel's server and made available for download, effectively eliminating the need for recording studios, audio engineers, CD duplication services, distribution channels, and product marketing. The vast majority of netlabels have adopted CC licensing, which has fostered a high level of creative output and global artistic communication uninhibited by traditional music industry schemes and copyright (ibid: 13). So, perhaps the real fear of the major labels lies in the possibility that this type of production could leave many people in the industry jobless.

This mode of music production renders the process relatively inexpensive while allowing the artist to retain more artistic control of their creative work. Those artists who publish their work through netlabels often do so in defiance of the commercialization of major labels and give their work away for free. However, because of the difficulties in finding this music through a search engine like Google, netlabels rely heavily upon viral marketing to spread the word about the free availability of their productions, which renders the opportunity for an artist to make a living on their work virtually non-existent. Moreover, Google can potentially profit from netlabels anytime someone searches for netlabel music using Google, because advertisements and sponsored results are built into the search process. As such, even though netlabels generally develop their own websites using their own servers to host the content, they are still subject to the limitations of the Google search engine, and are thus rendered another Googled entity on the Internet.

## **Conclusion**

Google has established itself globally as the most visible and widely used Internet search engine, which has resulted in a process of Googlization that allows a single private company to control the access to and dissemination of publicly available

information and culture on the Internet. This has resulted in the commoditization of online new media art, whereby artists produce content on their own time using their own resources and make it available on the Internet for free. Google and its advertisers can potentially profit from this free content and thus devalue the role of the content originators, who are unlikely to receive compensation for the work they produce.

In the end, artists should be wary of using the Internet as a primary distribution channel, because companies like Google are profiting from free artwork and destroying the value of artists and the work they produce. Any artist wishing to achieve a truly noncommercial online existence must take careful steps to ensure that only the public and themselves profit – monetarily or culturally – from the work they produce, because Google will likely remain the most used Internet search engine in the foreseeable future.

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