

Wonkr, Douglas Coupland's app for the future.

Emily Buzzo (MA Media Design & Communication) XPUB, Piet Zwart Institute. November 2016.

In this essay I will be exploring the realistic and imagined ideas behind the app Wonkr invented by Douglas Coupland. Wonkr first appeared in a summer 2015 article published by the Financial Times, of which Coupland has been a guest writer/ contributor to for many years discussing a range of articles to which his insight can be lent. The piece on Wonkr, originally titled 'We are data: the future of machine intelligence' was first published whilst he was a Resident Artist at Google's Cultural Institute, in Paris. Coupland comes from a background in Theatre and Sculpture, evolving into a highly successful fiction writer and artist. He is best known for his novel which captured the imaginations of pre-millennial readers, published in 1991, Generation X slowly found its way into the best-sellers lists worldwide.

I chose Coupland's article for a few reasons, which are, as follows: He is a current practitioner, he is right now, somewhere in the world, working on something tinkering away, he is alive and breathing in our current society, witnessing the same events unfold through varying news feeds as I am. This is fantastic, it means I have relatable qualities with him as an artist and writer. Secondly, He is not from the past he is very much from the present. A recent exhibition of, took place in close proximity to my current area of study, at the Witte De With Centre of Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. The title of the exhibition was Bitrot, which subsequently became the title of a slightly larger version of the exhibition catalogue, within which I discovered his article entitled Wonkr.

I want to look at the app he has invented called Wonkr. The framework for my questioning will be with something current, Cory Doctorow's - Information doesn't want to be free, something past - The Californian Ideology by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron along with the subsequent rebuttal by Louis Rossetto, the Wired publisher at the time. Now lets get stuck in and I'll try to best explain how I think these all tie together to give a greater understanding of how Coupland could come to the invention of an app such as Wonkr.

I'd like to introduce some terminology we should all be familiar with by now, firstly an 'app', referring to a digital application downloaded by a user to a mobile device, usually a smart phone, but more recently now this includes smart watches, suitcases, cars and pretty much anything running any kind of digital device, can now be updated with new apps.

Lets talk about data, in a 21st century sense, data is now more commonly used when complaining about the price of one's phone bill, "look how much data I've used" but is also used to discuss the gathering of information and details about you as an individual, your height, weight, internet usage, your travels, your digital footprint in particular, where have you been and where are you going? Then what about meta-data? Data results describing other data. Meta-data would be the analysis of your data, maybe the results of all the people living in your house, or neighbourhood, that would be the meta-data. For example 25% of the people in your neighbourhood have recently bought cat food online. Artificial intuition? For this I will quote Coupland who has summed it up quite nicely. *"Artificial intuition happens when a computer and its software look at data and analyse it using*

computation that mimics human intuition at the deepest levels: language, hierarchical thinking - even spiritual and religious thinking.” [Coupland, 2016]

Digital natives, referring to a generation of individuals who were born into the world of technology, and raised with the internet and digital hardware from a very early age, and thus are described as ‘native’ to this particular environment. It is a current topic and situation, with more and more of the population now using smart-phones and entire generations now being raised as digital natives it is a very real scenario to take a closer look at. Are we smart enough to avoid such pitfalls as could befall us, if we blindly go with the first corporation to entice us into their loyalty scheme, or whoever brings out the first app?

Wonkr comes from Coupland looking at apps that use incredibly specific geo-data and individual details about a person, and imagining how a political version of this kind of app would function. *“Am i among friends or enemies?” [Coupland, 2016]* In a similar way to Tinder and Grindr you would be shown data about your immediate area, in this particular app it would be about the political view points of those you are sharing a room with or within a wider vicinity. *“Wonkr tells you - with astonishing accuracy - who believes what, and where they do it.” [Coupland, 2016]*

Seems simple enough? From here Coupland explains how in the past, specifically twenty years ago, this would have seemed *“futuristic, implausible and in some way surmountable” [Coupland, 2016]*

and he has a point, here I’ve chosen to take a look at an article published twenty years ago The Californian Ideology [Barbrook & Cameron, 1995] which explores the idea of the advancement of a society being directly linked to technology as its driving force. Not something so astounding? An interesting point from them is *“What is unknown is the social and cultural impact of allowing people to produce and exchange almost unlimited quantities of information on a global scale” [Barbrook & Cameron, 1995]*

This is the very same kind of information sharing that Coupland is imagining within his app Wonkr, and right now we are seeing this impact and the ripples created from the mass sharing of information. One of the multitude of differences now, is that people seem to be less concerned with how much they are sharing, networks are cheaper, data is cheaper, wireless internet is accessible in more places than ever before, and it shows no signs of slowing. People now seem less distrustful of large corporations. Looking at the 2015 App usage statistics, shows that in 2015 alone over 25 Billion iOS apps were downloaded and more than double that of Android Apps, with an average of 2.8 hours of daily use. [Uber Statistics Report, 2016]

This is an incredibly large amount of information being sent and received globally every day.

So we’ve established that Wonkr collects and distributes large quantities of data. Now lets move forward into the nitty gritty of Wonkr itself, questions raised by Coupland are thus *“How much data am I generating?” [Coupland, 2016]* and *“Who would these near-future entities be that want all of your metadata anyway?” [Coupland, 2016]*

He’s right to ask, but more surely we should all be asking that? Of us 2.8 hours a day app users, how many of us have asked those questions? When determining how much data one generates or consumes, what is it measured against? Are you an average data user or an excessive data consumer? *“That’s my fear: technology magnifying the power of the powerful” [Doctorow, 2014]*

Is there really power in meta-data collection. Is this an appropriate fear to have.

Now let me introduce Cory Doctorow, a go to voice for layman terms when it comes to certain areas of data and copywrite within the the technology industry. Doctorow in many ways shares a similar beginning with Coupland, both being Canadian, both science fiction writers and both addressing issues in the public domain through their work as regular contributors over the last 15-20 years to papers and publishing platforms such as the Financial Times, New York Times and Wired. With a ten year age difference between them, Coupland has a slightly firmer grip on his “pre-internet brain” than Doctorow who is more of a digital native than Coupland. Doctorow’s recently published book ‘Information Doesn’t Want to be Free’ ends with a fantastic conclusion “What does the future hold?” [Doctorow, 2014]

Here I feel is a very honest assessment of what is coming next, when discussing large amounts of meta-data. “In a world of treacherous devices and networks, you don't have to choose: you can have a future that's made up of equal parts Orwell, Kafka, and Huxley.” [Doctorow, 2014]

A future made up of equal parts Orwell, Kafka and Huxley sounds utterly terrifying, yet slightly inevitable. In recent years the internet has been seemingly getting smaller, and more intuitive, corporations know more about you, and yet we also know more about them. Access to information is greater than it has ever been, and as much as Doctorow terrifies me with his honest account of an Orwellian future, a fear of his, he also reassures me. *“I believe that the only answer to this fear is to seize the means of information and ensure that technology's benefits are distributed to everyone, not just the powerful.”* [Doctorow, 2014]

I think that is what I will take away from these writings, the hope. Corporations are now more than ever being pressured in public domains to take responsibility for their data collection, data manipulation and other endeavours previously unmentioned. *“Facebook must be held accountable to the public”* [Huffington Post, 2016]

My final conclusion, is to be aware, and maybe it’s time we all started paying more attention to the small print and asked more questions about what was happening with our data. Start making informed decisions about the amount of information we are giving away, or at least raise our awareness of such matters. Something so widely recognised as a ‘buzzword’ yet very little is actually known about our data. Twenty Years ago we had this: *“who would have suspected that as technology and freedom were worshipped more and more, it would become less and less possible to say anything sensible about the society in which they were applied”* [Barbrook & Cameron, 1995]

That’s quite a negative outlook and I believe we should really be looking into what information we would need, to be able to say something sensible. I feel we should all, in light of recent global affairs within data privacy and security issues, start to pay more attention. Being able to recognise and digest data in a sensible way should be something we all learn how to do. How do we know what to trust, and what does this data really represent.

“How bad polling data fooled everyone except Donald Trump” [Fortune.com, 2016]

“Privacy experts fear Donald Trump running global surveillance network” [The Guardian, 2016]

We are now living in such a crucial information age of data that we should take steps to educate ourselves before we all end up signed up to Wonkr because as Coupland has told us *“the idea is basically too dumb to fail”* [Coupland, 2016]

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