

Epilogue: “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet...”

The World Economic Forum reports that in the year 2020, the global quantity of data is expected to reach forty-four zettabytes, or 1,000⁷ bytes.¹ This amount is forty times greater than the number of stars in the known universe.² Meanwhile, the two wealthiest individuals on the planet serve as chief executive officers for corporations who traffic in digital data. At the time of writing, Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com, Inc., holds a net worth of approximately 118 billion dollars.³ He is succeeded by Bill Gates, CEO of the Microsoft Corporation, whose net worth is valued at 108 billion dollars.⁴ While Amazon sells material items, its could not exist without the networked digital infrastructure which permits its rapid and global exchange of goods and services, and which also serves as one of its most profitable wares.⁵ Microsoft, on the other hand, was among the first corporations to benefit from the marginal input cost of digital production. By patenting and selling its flagship product — the Microsoft Windows operating system — at a cost that is much higher than that of the total inputs required to produce each copy, Microsoft prototyped a model of production fully distinct from that described by Karl Marx.⁶

To revisit the summary provided in chapter three, Marx’s economic analysis posits a dependent and directly causal relationship between human labor and material components which resolves in the price of a good or service.⁷ Because human labor and material resources are finite, so too is economic value. By denying intellectual authority to non-digital objects, the data episteme supports the dominance of a form of economic value which, in contrast with Marx, theoretically permits the infinite accumulation of capital — that is, Baudrillard’s sign value form.⁸ The data episteme facilitates the economic hegemony of the sign value form by implying that quite literally all phenomena, including the most obscure depths of human consciousness, may be rendered digital.

John Cheney-Lippold speaks to this when he claims that today’s networked citizens are “well-filled with data.”¹ This is a nod to the influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who in 1964 coined the term “high definition” to describe technological media “well-filled with data,” or those that are rich with information.² In his book *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*, Cheney-Lippold describes the digital human condition in rich detail. Cheney-Lippold tells the reader that, if they do not believe themselves to be “well-filled with data,” they should “roam the web for five minutes.” In those five minutes, he claims,

you will have generated, through your web activity, an identity that is likely separate from the person you thought you were. In a database far, far away, you have been assigned a gender, ethnicity, class, education level, and potentially the status of parent with x number of children. Maybe you were labeled a U.S. citizen or a foreigner. There’s

¹ John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2017), 3.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 22.

even a slight chance you were identified as a terrorist by the U.S. National Security Agency.³

This passage indicates that there is something sinister about the production of personal data by digital networks. His remarks align with Sun-Ha Hong’s theorization of “data’s intimacy,” or the idea that data “may come to know us better than we know ourselves.”⁴ Hong and Cheney-Lippold both address existential fears of technology-induced alienation and estrangement. If data are gaining epistemic authority over human life, or if our identity in a database is “separate” from the person that we think we are, our capacity for self-determination would appear to be under siege.

Then again, the person we think we are may not be very different from the identity produced by our online activities. Cheney-Lippold names “gender, ethnicity, class, education level, and potentially the status of parent with x number of children” as pre-established groups into which one might be algorithmically sorted.⁵ But these categories are not “separate” from human life as most people understand it. Gender, ethnicity, class, and parental status are attributes most willingly identify with. And although few might assume the normative, politically-coded label “terrorist,” it is at least true that “terrorism” entails activities which one might consider central to one’s identity. Who, then, does Cheney-Lippold think that we think we are?

Throughout my project, I have shown that data are impervious to formal boundaries and categorical divisions. Data do not recognize any difference between human beings and the qualities which define their digital selves. But these features are not always imposed on us without our consent. Across digital devices, users represent themselves as composites of pastimes; professional endeavors; political, aesthetic and religious commitments; personal relationships, et cetera. If these technologies provoke feelings of estrangement and powerlessness, it is not because they produce unrecognizable versions of ourselves. The sense of alienation described by Cheney-Lippold and Hong may instead be attributed to data’s hostility to the idiosyncratic.

The wager of psychedelic science is that the idiosyncratic plays a role in mental health. As argued in chapter five, psychedelic scientists face the task of affirming the idiosyncratic in their practice, despite the fact that it is not conventionally treated as a legitimate informant to scientific knowledge. The idiosyncratic also distinguishes individuals from what Gilles Deleuze calls “dividuals,” or human beings rendered as non-individuated “masses, samples, data, markets or ‘banks.’”⁶ Deleuze’s dividuals are “well-filled with data” or “high definition,” per McLuhan. The idiosyncratic lies beyond the remit of dividual life.

³ Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*, 3.

⁴ Sun-Ha Hong, “Data’s Intimacy: Machinic Sensibility and the Quantified Self,” *communication +1*: Vol. 5, Article 3 (Fall 2016), 2.

⁵ Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*, 3.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *October* 59 (1992), 5.

Although he doesn't use the term “idiosyncratic,” Michel Foucault suggests that idiosyncrasy plays a fundamental role in determining and maintaining distinctions between knowledge categories. In the preface to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, he claims that the text was inspired by the essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” by Jorge Luis Borges, best known as an author of short stories.⁷ Michel Foucault writes that this essay contains a passage which quotes a certain “Chinese encyclopaedia.” He continues to cite Borges directly:

[In the encyclopaedia] it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”⁸

He then points out that the taxonomy is riven with internal contradictions, and thus stands on unstable epistemological grounds. “The thing we apprehend in one great leap,” he says, “the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.”⁹ In other words, the list of animals presents a way of thinking that challenges all notions of logical coherence.

Foucault explains the list's central paradox:

The monstrous quality that runs through Borges's enumeration consists... in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible. The animals “(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush” — where could they ever meet, except in the immaterial sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it? Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language? Yet, though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in an unthinkable space.¹⁰

What is problematic, in other words, is that the animals can no longer “meet” one another, because the word “meet” suggests an assembly between multiple mutually distinct entities. But as Foucault points out, this taxonomy denies the possibility of any such distinction. It instead undermines the logic by which such divisions are actually distinct.

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 103.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), xvi.

⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xvi.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii.

The problem, of course, is that the list’s constitutive categories overlap with and encompass one another. For example, it’s possible for an animal to simultaneously “belong to the Emperor” and “be drawn with a very fine camelhair brush.” The taxonomy thus violates its own internal order. As it describes the relationship of the animal to its encompassing category, it nullifies any distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic attributes. For example, the term “et cetera” means “miscellaneous” and “innumerable,” and might be rephrased as “infinite” or “indefinite:” it evokes the nonspecific. “Et cetera” is not an inherent property of any animal, and a group of animals can only be considered “innumerable” as relative to an external measure or standard. Thus the terms “et cetera” and “innumerable” reflexively refer to the relationship between the animals and the list to which they belong. On the other hand, “frenzied” and “embalmed” are inherent properties: an animal may be embalmed even if the condition of being “embalmed” is not determined by its categorical identity.

The categories listed above are ontologically separate at the most fundamental level. Nevertheless, the Chinese encyclopedia renders them equivalent by making them perform precisely the same taxonomical function. Foucault writes that one category in particular exemplifies this contradiction. As he writes,

The central category of animals “included in the present classification,” with its explicit reference to paradoxes we are familiar with, is indication enough that we shall never succeed in defining a stable relation of contained to container between each of these categories and that which includes them all: if all the animals divided up here can be placed without exception in one of the divisions of this list, then aren’t all the other divisions to be found in that one division too? And then again, in what space would that single, inclusive division have *its* existence? Absurdity destroys the *and* of the enumeration by making impossible the *in* where the things enumerated would be divided up.¹¹

Here, Foucault highlights the obvious fact that all animals qualify as “contained within the present classification” so long as they are placed there. There are no barriers to entry, as the label “contained within the present classification” only refers to itself. Because it does not describe any particular or intrinsic qualities of the entities it might contain, all potential inhabitants may in fact be classified as “within the present classification.” The intrinsic status of “animal” is not even a prerequisite. Rather, one becomes an animal on admission to the taxonomy.

The purpose of a taxonomy is to mark a system of formal discontinuities between phenomena which share a common feature, as in a botanical taxonomy which identifies different members of the plant kingdom. The Borgesian taxonomy is “monstrous” because it destroys the basis for any such distinctions. In a way, it operates like Jean Baudrillard’s “ecstasy of communication,” or Byung-Chul Han’s “inferno of the same.” As I wrote in chapter five, this is

¹¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii.

also the signature function of digitization. On entrance to the category of “data,” objects become qualitatively like all other digital phenomena.

The inferno of the same is “monstrous” in theory. It does not, however, exist in practice. In his essay “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist,” the poet Kenneth Goldsmith claims that he used to make the titular observation “hyperbolically,” as something of a cynical joke.¹² “But as time has gone on,” he continues, “it’s proved to be a truism, perhaps the paradigmatic truism of our times.”¹³ For this reason, he writes, he was inspired to develop the website UbuWeb, which archives avant-garde poetry and visual art. UbuWeb’s mission is to ensure the existence of obscure cultural artifacts even after their analog counterparts have long vanished.¹⁴

Goldsmith admits that he uses the word “existence” in a very limited sense. “By exist,” he writes, “I mean something exists when it can be shared, altered and re-circulated.”¹⁵ His “existence,” in other words, is wholly positive. It aligns with a worldview which only recognizes that which can be verified by external consensus, as in Auguste Comte’s formulation of positivism.¹⁶ Goldsmith is aware that the general concept of “existence” supersedes the capacity to be shared, altered, and circulated. “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet” redefines “existence” as “existence online,” effectively designating all offline phenomena as non-existent. On the practical level, Goldsmith is speaking to the marginalization of offline phenomena; in theory, he suggests that these phenomena do not exist at all. As he writes, “the new radicalism is paper. Publish it on a printed page and no one will ever know about it.”¹⁷ He also tells the reader that if they do not want something to exist, they should “keep it off the web.”¹⁸ The essay concludes on this pithy word of advice.

The data episteme will become total when all non-digital phenomena cease to have any epistemic significance — that is, when they cease to exist as informants to knowledge. In reality, this will not come to pass, but as a theoretical possibility it represents the terminus of the epistemic problems presented by big data. Alan Liu has warned about an imminent epistemic horizon, or a situation where the hierarchical measures normally used to validate knowledge disintegrate amid digital epistemic acceleration.¹⁹ These measures constitute Foucault’s “common ground,” or the site which makes possible the thinking of difference and alterity. Bodies of knowledge lose their points of distinction when they are perpetually open to epistemic permeation. Digitization renders knowledge so capacious.

Foucault likens the common ground that has been lost to a certain “famous” operating table.²⁰ This is a reference to *The Songs of Maldoror (Les Chants de Maldoror)*, by the Comte de

¹² Kenneth Goldsmith. “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/03/if-it-doesnt-exist-on-the-internet-it-doesnt-exist>

¹³ Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

¹⁴ See www.ubuweb.com.

¹⁵ Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

¹⁶ Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 26.

¹⁷ Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

¹⁸ Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

¹⁹ Alan Liu, “Theses on the Epistemology of the Digital: Advice for the Centre for Digital Studies,” 2014

²⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii

Lautréamont, an early prototype of surrealist literature. The novel contains Lautréamont’s famous description of a young boy who is as “beautiful” as “the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella.”²¹ Here, he imagines the assembly of two objects which bear no obvious relation to one another in a context that is unrelated to either one. In comparing the lost common ground to Lautréamont’s operating table, Foucault highlights the operating table as the category or container which permits the “and” of the enumeration of these items. The table provides the basis for a conceptual link between two very different things; this link in turn accentuates the difference between the two. The unique character of the sewing machine is thrown into high relief by its juxtaposition with the umbrella and the table upon which both rest.

It is not possible to articulate the logic which links the sewing machine to the umbrella. There is no logic to be found; the scene is meant to be absurd. The connective structure of the operating table is unintelligible and inscrutable to all measures of thought. This is why Lautréamont’s narrator describes the chance meeting as “beautiful.”

The operating table plays the part of Deleuze and Guattari’s idiosyncratic idiot, or he who “wills the absurd.”²² I have suggested that the therapeutic mechanisms of psychedelics also advance a sort of thought which defies positive logic. Psychedelics might be said to function like Lautréamont’s operating table. Certainly, the sewing machine cannot meet the umbrella in the space of data, or the inferno of the same. The task for those who would seek alternatives is to recognize what is not the inferno, make it endure, and give it space.²³

²¹ Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror & the Complete Works of the Comte De Lautréamont* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2011), 193.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What is Philosophy?,” qtd. in Han *Psychopolitics*, 81.

²³ See Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 165: “The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space”