

No in Disguise: Algorithmically Targeted Conversations About Sexual Consent in a Multimedia Art Installation

Simon Boas

ABSTRACT

As the distinction between our online and offline selves collapses, how we are able to express ourselves digitally has direct consequences for the world we experience offline. This paper examines those consequences through a work of art that explores how a popular dating app prestructures sexual relationships: The author's collaborative multimedia installation *No in Disguise* features procedurally composited video of men reading interviews with dating app users algorithmically targeted by their views on sexual consent as expressed in their profiles.

Simon Boas
Artist, Researcher
University of California,
Santa Cruz, Digital Arts
and New Media Program
407 McHenry Rd
Santa Cruz, CA 95064
U.S.A.
studio@midgray.org
www.midgray.org

The popular dating website OkCupid [1] features hundreds of multiple-choice “Match Questions” designed to produce highly compatible potential dates. One of the sex-related questions has a particularly limited set of answer choices. The user is prompted with the statement “No means NO!” and presented with the following answer choices: A) “Always. Period.” B) “Mostly, occasionally it’s really a Yes in disguise.” C) “A No is just a Yes that needs a little convincing!” D) “Never, they all want me. They just don’t know it” [2].

The answer options demonstrate how personal representations in online data reduce a complex gradient of human views and experiences to a relatively small number of discrete categories. As the distinction between our online and offline selves collapses, the ways in which we are able to express ourselves in digital space has a direct bearing on the world we experience offline.

Social media has been the public stage on which powerful social movements like #MeToo have pushed conversations about sexual violence into the mainstream. At the same time, concerns about the proliferation of fake news in social media have begun to bring the power of personal data—and its abuse—into the public consciousness. It is therefore paramount to study and challenge the hegemonic power structures replicated in online platforms for social interaction.

My work as an artist explores how our willingness to forfeit agency over our digital selves shapes the way we experience the world around us. The way sexual relationships and power are prestructured in dating apps provides a particularly focused example. The multimedia installation I co-created with artist and designer Kris Blackmore, titled *No in Disguise*, examines OkCupid Match Questions about sexual consent as a way to initiate discussions about the cultural narratives of gender, power and permissions that social media platforms reflect and reinforce.

Context

Data structures can be leveraged to affect the way we think. More than a mere reflection of the world around them, social media platforms’ underlying user data structures actually normalize and codify reductive personal representations in the offline world. Research conducted in 2012 found that when Facebook users’ personalized News Feeds were manipulated to show fewer positive emotional expressions from other users, “people produced fewer positive posts and more negative posts; when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite pattern occurred” [3]. Zeynep Tufekci claims that this study’s method for shaping perceptions creates “an environment that nudges you imperceptibly” into “desired behavior” as a means of societal control [4].



Convenience is the service for which people passively sell their personal data and thereby allow their identities to be reduced to data structures. Rita Raley, in “Dataveillance and Countervailance,” says that “there seems to have been a general acquiescence to the notion that the distinctions between private and public and personal and nonpersonal when it comes to data are at best tenuous and that it is practically and economically in our interest to regard them as such” [5].

Langdon Winner describes technologies as “ways of building order in our world.” He continues, “In the processes by which structuring decisions are made, different people are differently situated and possess unequal degrees of power as well as unequal levels of awareness” [6]. This is to say that not all models of control are deliberately imposed; power asymmetries can arise from social myopia in platform design. D. Fox Harrell warns that such myopia replicates and reinforces social prejudice [7].

Relevant Art Practice

The proliferation of networked technology in everyday life has been met with artistic projects that creatively comment on the physical-world consequences of our online representation through data. Thus, Kyriaki Goni transmuted five years of Google search history into printed form as audience members chose which terms to delete in a performance of digital forgetting [8], suggesting the weight and consequence that lurks behind the seemingly impossible amount of data that technology companies collect from us.

With *Obscurity* (2016), Paolo Cirio has been blurring the images of individuals targeted by for-profit mugshot websites to hamper the exploitation of people through their public criminal data, giving people an avenue to reclaim partial agency over their digital identities by appropriating predatory networks of personal data. He also fosters conversation around the issue with the “Right to Remove” forum he maintains as part of the project [9].

Angela Washko takes advantage of the incomplete nature of digital representation to promote difficult conversations. She facilitates discussions of feminism with selectively targeted groups to highlight the absence of those discussions in broader mainstream culture [10]. The viewpoints captured in her work are ones not openly discussed in mainstream public forums, and therefore may rarely meet intellectual resistance. To address such toxic attitudes, they must first be identified and understood. This particular aspect of Washko’s work inspired our approach in *No in Disguise*.

The Art Project

Blackmore and I wanted to know why some men on OkCupid overtly stated regressive views on consent through the site’s Match Questions. The process outlined below represents a distilled form of the profile filtering that social networks like Facebook make available to their advertisers. We wanted to explore the capacity of these tools to facilitate complex discussions on challenging personal topics. Because some men were willing to casually state their views on consent through OkCupid’s Match Questions, we had a direct path to discussing those views with them.

To communicate with other users on the site, we created a profile for a fictional woman named Emily in Los Angeles. Emily’s profile received hundreds of unsolicited messages from nearby men every week. To search through all these users, I wrote a Python script that accessed OkCupid through an unofficial API [11].

At the time of this research, there were two Match Questions among the hundreds on OkCupid that were explicitly about sexual consent: the aforementioned “No means NO!” prompt and another that asked, “Do you feel there are any circumstances in which a person is obligated to have sex with you?” with “Yes” or “No” as answer choices.

The algorithm executed in the Python script iterated through every profile that sent Emily a message, searching for our two target questions by OkCupid's internal identification numbers. If found, it compared the user's answer with our target answers: any answer besides "Always. Period." to the first question or the answer "Yes" to the second. The script stored the usernames of positive matches in a list emailed to Blackmore. She would then log in to Emily's OkCupid account and respond, performing as Emily, to the initial message those users had sent her.

When the men asked to meet Emily in person, Blackmore would ask why they had answered our target Match Questions the way they had. An excerpt of one of these conversations follows (with the correspondent's username changed to protect his identity).

- Emily: I thought the way you answered the "No means NO!" question was interesting. . . . You said "Mostly, occasionally it's really a Yes in disguise." I was wondering what you mean by that? Because to me, no means no always, but I was wondering if you had a different perspective on it?
- B.T.: Oh that. I meant some people would be too shy to say yes, when they say no, it actually means a shy yes, if that makes sense. But if I know no means no to you, I won't force you to do anything when you say no.

I recorded video and audio of male-identifying volunteers reading the transcripts of Blackmore's OkCupid conversations from a teleprompter. To subvert the notion that violence comes primarily from social outliers, I compiled the faces of the volunteers into a database of masculine features. I used Adobe Premiere video editing software to slice the video of each volunteer's face into segments representing memorable facial features and then separated each video clip by spoken line for each interview. The result was over 2,300 video clips of men reading interviews as four different men from OkCupid.

I then used Vuo media programming software to randomly combine the video segments in a preset layout while playing back the recorded conversations. For each line read, the program procedurally chooses and plays back a random volunteer reading that line for each one of the facial feature video slices. The result is that a different collection of voices and facial features performs the conversations in every viewing. If the audience never sees and hears the same face explaining regressive views toward women, those views belong not to one person but to a more generalized masculine identity—the point being that all men share responsibility in fighting misogyny.

Recording the OkCupid reenactments with other men often ended in meaningful discussions about the role of consent in our own lives. We include video and audio of these discussions in the installation to suggest to the audience a starting point for nuanced conversations about sexual violence.

The multimedia installation features the videos projected on two walls: one with the collaged facial features reading the OkCupid transcripts and the other with the excerpts of discussions I held with the volunteers after they read the transcripts. The videos alternate: one reenacted conversation followed by one response video. While the face on one wall speaks, the other waits as if the two are responding to each other (Fig. 1).

To communicate to viewers that the statements in the videos were not fictional, we created a replica of the OkCupid iOS app that featured Emily's profile, selected conversations from her inbox including the four conversations that volunteers reenacted in the video, and offered the option to email feedback to Emily. We provided three iPod touch devices loaded with this app displayed on a stand with text that we wrote describing the process behind the project and inviting visitors to interact with the iPods (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. *No in Disguise* installation at the University of California, Santa Cruz Digital Arts Research Center, June 2018.
(© Simon Boas. Photo: David Pace.)

Ethical Considerations

This process developed organically as we explored the potential of technology to facilitate difficult conversations. We did not approach the project as an attempt to extract data from people online, as the goal of this artwork has been to provide a basis for nuanced discussion rather than present hard findings.

We removed all identifying information to ensure the anonymity of the OkCupid users with whom we engaged because 1) these users were likely unaware they were speaking to a fictional person, which we deemed necessary to elicit a response representative of the behavior they might display on a date with a woman; and 2) we wanted to present their viewpoints as products of a larger cultural conversation about sexual consent rather than as the views of a few individuals.

We clearly communicated this to the installation audience in the introductory text printed next to the iOS devices, where we also explained that the readings did not represent the views of the volunteers displayed in the videos. The decision to display the response videos alongside the reading videos reinforced this point and it gave primacy to the responses as a starting point for discussing the work.

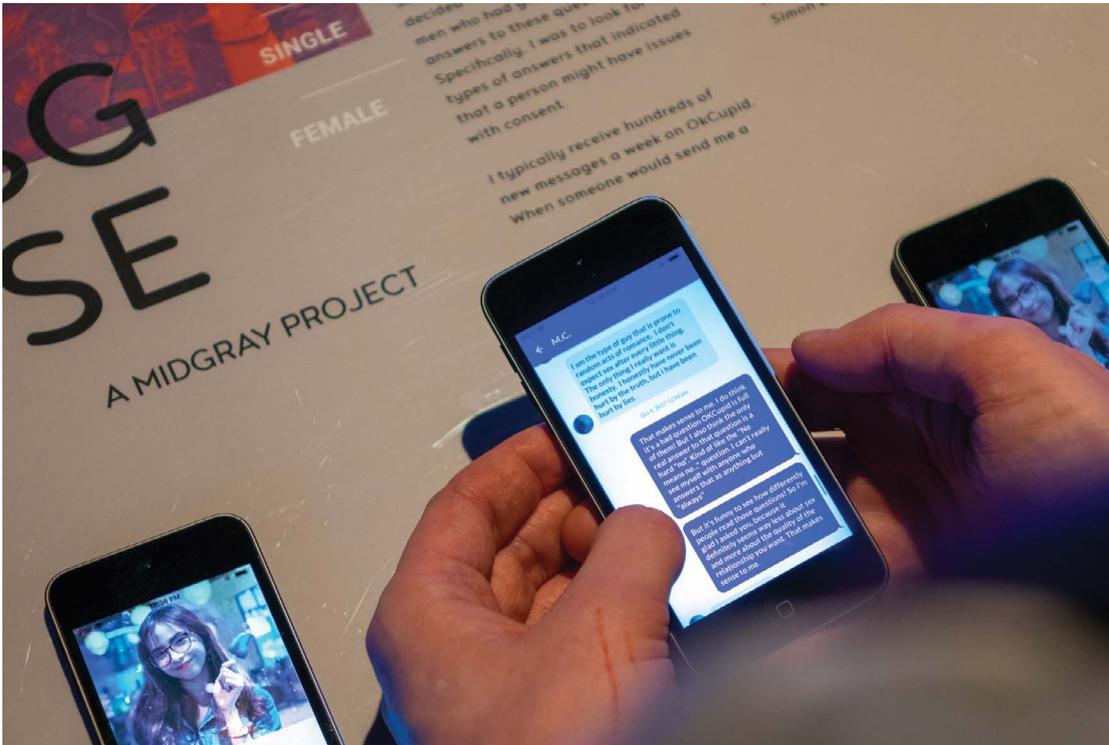


Fig. 2. The custom iOS app featuring Emily's OkCupid profile and chat transcripts, seen on the installation's informational display stand. (© Simon Boas. Photo: Simon Boas.)

Conclusion

In *No in Disguise*, Blackmore and I asked men on OkCupid if their views aligned with those they had expressed in their profiles. This often precipitated a discussion about the shortcomings of the Match Questions we had asked them about, followed by a deeper discussion of their personal views. We then had the rare opportunity to directly challenge their views in a constructive manner. In this way the project allowed us to critique a data structure that reduces complex issues to multiple-choice questions from within while repurposing that system to advocate for social change on an individual level.

The men with whom Blackmore interacted on OkCupid did not seem to consider the offline consequence of the views they expressed online. But conversations about sexual consent often do not happen until it is too late. This project, designed to initiate a broad cultural conversation by starting at the level of the individual, succeeded in multiple ways: from the OkCupid conversations through the discussions with volunteers that followed the video readings and the discussions prompted by the visitors to the multimedia installation.

The lasting impact of a conversation is difficult to measure, but OkCupid's data structure provides a glimmer of insight into the effects of Emily's conversations: Some of the men on OkCupid changed their responses to the Match Question "Do you feel there are any circumstances in which a person is obligated to have sex with you?" from "Yes" to "No."

The installation represents one output of an evolving project and there is room for growth. The more voices this project features, the greater diversity of viewpoints it will represent.

References and Notes

1. E. Dwoskin, “Q&A: OkCupid’s Co-Founder on the Myth of the Data Scientist ‘Unicorn,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 August 2014, blogs.wsj.com/digits/2014/08/12/qa-okcupids-cofounder-on-the-growing-pains-of-data-science. OkCupid’s co-founder claimed approximately 5 million users in 2014.
2. OkCupid, accessed 15 May 2018, www.okcupid.com.
3. A.D.I. Kramer, J.E. Guillory and J.T. Hancock, “Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* **111**, No. 24, 8788–8790 (17 June 2014). OkCupid has conducted similar experiments on its users. See Dwoskin [1].
4. Z. Tufekci, “Is the Internet Good or Bad? Yes.” *Matter*, 12 February 2014, www.medium.com/matter/is-the-internet-good-or-bad-yes-76d9913c6011.
5. R. Raley, “Dataveillance and Countervailance,” in *“Raw Data” Is an Oxymoron*, L. Gitelman, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013) p. 125.
6. L. Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” *Daedalus* **109**, No. 1, 121–136 (1980).
7. D.F. Harrell, “Designing Empowering and Critical Identities in Social Computing and Gaming,” *CoDesign* **6**, No. 4, 187–206 (2010).
8. K. Goni, “Deletion Process_Only You Can See My History: Investigating Digital Privacy, Digital Oblivion, and Control on Personal Data Through an Interactive Art Installation,” *Leonardo* **49**, No. 4, 324–333 (2016).
9. P. Cirio, *Obscurity*, www.paolocirio.net/work/obscurity.
10. A. Washko, www.angelawashko.com.
11. I. Malison, *okcupyd*, Python 2018, www.github.com/IvanMalison/okcupyd.