

Introduction

For this assignment I have chosen to digitize the plants in my household, for several reasons. First of all, in order to keep track of when my plants have been watered, as to not water them too much, and secondly, to know the names of each plants.

Creating the data set

In order to digitize the plants, I first took a photography of each separate plant, using my cellphone, which then through the application "PlantNet", I managed to determine each plants specie, family, genus and common name. Secondly, I put in additional information, in order to create a "usecase" for this dataset. In this instance it was managing water, age, and a picture of the plant.

Implications

This was a brief introduction as to why and how I created the attached dataset, and through this introduction, you can immediately tell, that the data here is not "raw". As Gitelman & Jackson elaborate on in "Raw Data Is an Oxymoron", there is no such thing as raw data, though it may be implied by medias. This data is highly biased, not only in the information shown, but also how I have chosen to display the data. For instance, many of the plants have more common names than shown in the dataset (according to the application PlantNet), but I have chosen not to display them, since I either though they were highly regional names, or that they were duplicates of other names. This also leans into Haraway's text of "Situated Knowledges", where it becomes obvious, that each text (in the phenomenological meaning as well) is situated, meaning that it is subjective. This is relevant in the dataset both in the gathering of the data, where my (and the crowdsourced names of the plants through PlantNet), is subjective in its own way.

Even the machine learning algorithm, which found the names of the plant, is subjective in its own way, since it is fed data from the users. The whole "feeding process" of the algorithm is as well very biased, in the sense that you rely on other users, or developers/researchers, to categorize the plants correctly (from your perspective), in order to get the desired result. This perspective can be translated into "power" in more senses. First of all, this empowers me to be able to actually retrieve the names of my plants, which eases the caring of the plants. Secondly, this algorithm, and all the other users indirectly, holds power over me, influence of sort, in the form, that they are able to impact the suggestions of plants I get when searching.

The whole idea of power in digitization, is also something Thylstrup touches in "The Politics of Mass Digitization", where it become obvious, that being able to influence the output of algorithms are quite powerful.

Not only that, as many texts elaborates on, just the sheer fact of understanding algorithms and computation is a power in and of itself, which separates this very generation!

Ethical considerations and perspectives

As stated earlier, I have chosen some of the common names to show in the data set, and hence also chosen not to include some. This was not due to them being unethical. Actually, it was more the other way around, where I have chosen to include some which could be interpreted as unethical. This for instance being “The Wandering Jew”, which to some might be offensive. This consideration I chose however not to act upon, since no matter how offensive the name might be, it is a common name. This relates to me stating in the beginning, that I chose to create this dataset for myself, hence it is not a public record. I chose to include these, since it may help me explaining others which plant I am talking about, and search more broadly for the plant online. With this argumentation, I am very well aware, that I too constitute the name, by taking it in, and using it. Despite this, it is easier to search when having a broad variety of names, and also this task was to explore what could be included, and the ethical considerations here of, which also is a reason, that I have chosen to include this very name.

This is not me saying, that personal use trumps ethical consideration, but more so a statement that it is a delicate balance between ethical consideration and use of the database. This is especially true taking all ethical considerations into play, which would include all individuals in the known world. I am therefore inclined to take Immanuel Kant’s stance on ethics here, by claiming that this action is not unethical in itself, since I actually would want anybody in my shoes to make the exact same actions. This of course not meaning that is in an ethical action, since I am not doing it in and of the ethics itself.

There is also a question to be asked, both through this assignment, but also within the task: Which things should we digitize, and what implications might this have for the future?

My example, with digitizing plants, might for example be a step into a “Smart Home”, where most things are controlled by computational devices, that I may have some degree of control over. This leads to the phenomenon of “Techo-Chauvanism”, which was especially on its rise in the late 90’s with the “dot-com” era, where everything seemed to be digitized, and the question most often asked was not “should this be digitized?” but rather “why should it not?”. As with all ethical considerations, it is possible to completely devastate the use of the object completely through ethical considerations, but I believe we own it, both to our self, but especially our future society, to ask whether it is really necessary to digitize everything. An argument could be made, that these physical objects, such as my plants, are digitized in order to preserve them, but the question that could be asked here is, whether the ones in the table are actually my plants, a representation of them, or something completely else?

They become what you could describe as “Evocative Objects” (Turkle 2007), meaning they carry with them a new, or rather amended meaning. Hence they are my plants, but still they are not, since they have now become digital, and can shift ownership, and even be copied, without direct consequences to my plants. It is a fun thought experiment; how these plants would transform, what they would become, if they were to be copied, examined, and understood by someone else completely. Fun until you realize that it is what is happening with humans in the algorithms driven by surveillance economy (Zuboff 2015). What become of us, if we were to take the place of the plants?

Bibliography

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PlantNet: <https://plantnet.org/en/>