

RADICAL TRANSPARENCY: AND HOW TO DESIGN THIS?

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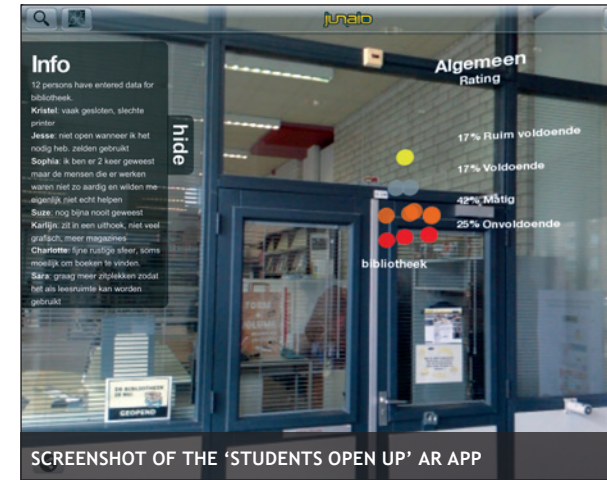
AN APPARENTLY HARMLESS APP TO GAUGE STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF THEIR LECTURERS, DESIGNED BY DESIGNARBEID, WAS MET WITH FIERCE OPPOSITION FROM THE ART ACADEMY WHERE IT WAS PRESENTED. THE PROJECT DEMONSTRATES THAT THE INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY ON (FUTURE) SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS HAS MANY COMPLEX FACETS TO CONSIDER. DESIGNERS, ARTISTS AND ARCHITECTS INCREASINGLY QUESTION THE CIVIL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF AVAILABLE DIGITAL DATA AND ITS USAGE. DESIGNARBEID'S CO-OWNER BARBARA ASSELBERGS REFLECTS ON THE RADICAL TRANSPARENCY IN EVERYDAY LIFE AND HOW THIS AFFECTS DESIGN PRACTICE.



An invisible network of wireless, traceable chips, sensors, scanners and cameras is evolving around us at an exponential rate. The quality and quantity of the data collected with this network is increasing at an equally fast pace. Newly emerging networks collect so-called 'big data' and convert it into meaningful information. These networks are able to make connections between all kinds of physical indicators (people's facial expressions, body temperature and heart rate) and lifestyle choices (people's social activities and consumer behaviour). The models derived from these data cannot only predict people's behaviour, but can also interpret it. However, this often involves confidential information.

Processing all of this data can have a great impact on cities – and the behaviour of its residents. In the future these data sets from individuals could be analysed to predict the likelihood of them committing a criminal offence in the months ahead. This information can be collected without the need for specialist knowledge or any kind of explicit consent from the public. Is it, then, in any way desirable that everyone knows exactly what you think of your neighbour, your employer or, in the case of this project, your lecturer?

In March 2013 DesignArbeid presented 'Students Open Up', an application that allows students to share their opinions about the performance of their lecturers and the quality of general facilities like the cafeteria, the library and the work spaces. To reflect on the public nature of the data and the inability of individuals to remain anonymous, the students had to use their own name when providing feedback via the app. The data set was displayed in a graphical form in a physical location in the college rather than assigned to the individual lecturers. Responses included: 'Cool projects', 'often nice guest lecturers', 'sometimes varying feedback' and 'breaks take too long'. More than 60 third-year students gave



SCREENSHOT OF THE 'STUDENTS OPEN UP' AR APP

their lecturers a 'good', 'satisfactory', 'moderate' or 'insufficient' score and were able to add a brief explanation.

All ratings were linked to the physical location of the relevant lecturer's class. This was done not only to map the individual qualities of the lecturers, but primarily to make all the members of the college aware of the implications of this information being made public. In the preparation stage for the intervention, in which students from the Fashion Design, Graphic Design, Illustration and Spatial Design departments submitted data via the app, head-lecturers and students responded positively to the initiative. (Students from the Photography Department declined to participate owing to concerns that it may have negative repercussions for their lecturers).

The app is a useful tool in collecting and assessing current students' opinions on the quality of the education provided by the institution. However, of more interest is that sharing these opinions allows prospective students to draw on the previous experiences of the existing student body to make more informed decisions regarding their future. DesignArbeid extended the project to the academy's Open Day which took place in March

2013, to investigate this aspect further. During the open day a team of designers and artists at the entrance of the college introduced the visitors to the 'Students Open Up' AR app on dedicated iPads. Of the visitors the young prospective students rather than their parents were comfortable installing the app on their phones and proceeding to the introduction to the college. On their way out they were questioned about the impact of the data from the app presented to them throughout the college and their opinions of the open day overall.

This response is remarkable given that these sorts of experiments belong in an environment such as an art academy where creativity and free-thinking experiments are a cornerstone of its mission. Indeed creative institutions should embrace these kinds of initiatives and be keen to identify themselves with them. The shock to the college authorities came from the app creating an alternative perspective. By observing the academy from the inside-out, through the eyes of the students, the official publicity policy of the

investigate the relationship between 'transparency' and 'confidentiality', and from the results of this research, develop new strategies and, perhaps even, new social structures. The challenge for designers and artists is to visualise this relationship and generate meaningful discussions in order to create solutions to the problems raised.

The app 'Students Open Up' was developed by DesignArbeid in collaboration with AugmentNL. ■

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Could the information from current students possibly influence prospective students' choice of study programme? The responses to the first Facebook posts about the open day were positive. The prospective students liked the idea, and on the day itself also provided more detailed feedback. Some commented "I already made my choice, I came for the college and not for the lecturers". Other students said they would be directly influenced by negative comments from students about their lecturers.

While the event was progressing, a representative from the communication department unexpectedly stepped in. She had been unaware of the full nature of the intervention and demanded DesignArbeid to put a halt to it immediately. Furthermore, she requested that they refrain from publicising the project. The reason given for this strong response was the inability of the college to control and manage the app or the information gathered. Alongside the regulated information provided by the art academy, visitors would have access to an alternative, unedited narrative, based on the opinion of current students.

college was reduced to just one of the flows of information the public could choose to access. The information available to the students then becomes more complex as it can no longer be presented as an unambiguous and unified narrative.

When using the app to fill in their opinions, existing students indicated that they were fully aware of the consequences of the intervention, and the responsibility it entailed. Thus, the communication department should not have reacted solely with the interests of the institute itself in mind, but should have taken a stance regarding the vulnerability of its lecturers and staff.

A lively debate about privacy and the ethical impact surrounding the use of data is taking place globally. What does this radical transparency mean for individual social interactions and the design of new interaction models? In today's world it is no longer an option to be 'for' or 'against' transparency and openness. It is simply a reality in today's world. The question is 'how do we want to engage with it?'. It is important to in-

Image by Iris Vetter, 2013



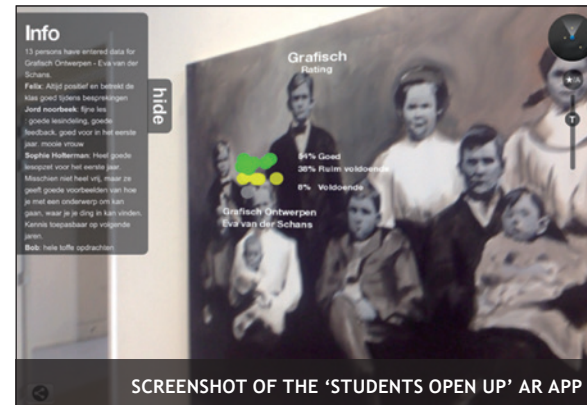
About DesignArbeid

DesignArbeid is run by designers Ruben Abels and Barbara Asselbergs. It is a studio in Amsterdam that focuses on social issues. One of its primary objectives is to consider the maintenance and improvement of living conditions within our cities. In particular, to identify the concrete steps we can take as individuals to influence our surroundings and what kind of contribution new media and technology can make in this respect. DesignArbeid attempts to stimulate 'design thinking' in neighbourhoods and communities. The resident's quality of life always comes first in each of the projects undertaken.

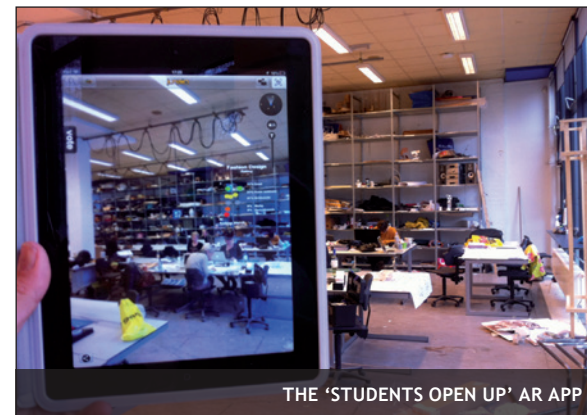
DesignArbeid developed the AR intervention 'Politics in the street' in 2012 where they confronted visitors of the Rembrandtplein (in Amsterdam) with the voting behaviour of other visitors to the same square (see www.designarbeid.nl/#/politiek-op-sstraat-).

In 2012 DesignArbeid developed the AR app 'Open lectures' where visitors to the lecture series 'Summit of New Thinking' (Berlin 2012) were able to vote on the speakers in real time (see www.designarbeid.nl/#/voting-for-lectures).

www.designarbeid.nl
www.augmentnl.com



SCREENSHOT OF THE 'STUDENTS OPEN UP' AR APP



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