

# Invisible Participation: Language and the Internet

Mimi Cabell, John Cayley, Daniel Howe, Jason Huff, Clement Valla

Language is the hidden scaffolding of networks, applications, and web sites. It is minified and monetized in ways that are often occluded from the everyday user's experience. From their point of view, the interaction is innocuous – language is used for labels and explanations. A few words are typed into an empty field and thousands of related results appear instantly. A simple search, an email to a friend, a unique phrase – all easily logged, monetized, and indexed. This is the world of invisible participation.

Our panel is interested in language on the Internet, how it is created, by whom, where it exists, and how it is used. Three examples: Google reads our emails, garners information from our personal messages and uses that profiling strategy to select “relevant” ads. It then displays those ads on the screen next to the very emails from which the information was initially taken. Facebook and other social media platforms use similar methods of securing and storing data – data that is paradoxically private and public, and

all personal. Further, crowd-sourced encyclopedias like Wikipedia are shaping the way we read, learn, and think. Language is what links all of these sites together. All of the sites' underlying organization and structures have been built to follow the logic we ourselves employ in using language. “Robots” read content, algorithms interpret it and databases memorize it. The impact of this process is no longer confined to the Internet, but has reached beyond it into our everyday lives.

Excerpt from John Cayley's *Invisible Participation: Terms of (ab)use*

There must have been a historical moment when Google realized that its famous search box was not a portal but a mouth, when it realized that the collection and analysis of all the search terms continually being supplied to Google by human writers was far more valuable than any indexes it had generated from what had already been inscribed on the surface of the network. By definition and protocol, the surface of the network is open to and, in principle, independently indexable by any terminal peer. Thus we still think of Google as a gift. A true search has been freely given. Any other terminal peer might have found a true search, but Google did so. The trick was simply to discover the one true search at the historical moment just before Moore's law made it feasible for any terminal peer to do the same on any scale. The free service worked. It was and is used by all-but-every terminal on the network. Google as the zero-degree of the portal—transparent, self-effacing access to some other writing on the network that a human user wishes to read—was precisely that: nothing. For now we see that Google is entirely focused and founded on everything that we feed into its mouth, everything that is proper to us as desiring humans, or, more precisely, proper to the network-authorized agencies of human and posthuman desire. Google must find a way to keep an overwhelming and representative majority of such entities feeding it with data (capta) or, better yet—learning from Facebook, its complementary vectoralist peer—a way to take into itself (as Google+) every property and method of symbolic human self-representation on the network. As of the present day, a vast majority of human terminals on the network willingly and frequently write into one particular space, the maw of Google. At the very moment of doing so we more or less implicitly agree to terms that establish a hierarchical, non-mutual, non-reciprocal relationship and we allow the abduction of our terms of reference.

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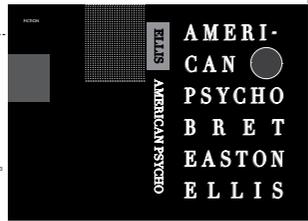
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The making of the agreement by such means is likely to be asserted as an initial article of the terms themselves. Contracts are often agreed more or less implicitly—by the shaking of hands, after a loose verbal exchange, and so on—and, as such, they may nonetheless be recognized in custom and in law. In the case of Terms of Use or Terms of Service, the contract is most often explicit from the point of view of the provider, while the human terminal is likely to remain unaware of the agreed terms in any detail.

# Related Works



**American Psycho**  
Softcover book  
Mimi Cabell &  
Jason Huff  
(2011)

*American Psycho* was created by sending the entirety of Bret Easton Ellis' violent, masochistic and gratuitous novel *American Psycho* through GMail, one page at a time. Mimi Cabell and Jason Huff collected the ads that appeared next to each email and used them to annotate the original text, page by page. In printing it as a perfect bound book, they erased the body of Ellis' text and left only chapter titles and constellations of our added footnotes. What remains is *American Psycho*, told through its chapter titles and annotated relational Google ads.



**Hapax Phaenomena**  
Image collection  
John Cayley &  
Clement Valla  
(2011)

*Selected notes from the Release Statements:*

- \* These Phaenomena are fragile.
- \* The moment of historical singularity for each constituent image will come to an end if a Hapax Phaenomenon is exposed to the network - by posting online for example - since indexing robots will then capture the metadata search terms in a new context and thus return - at the very least - the already collected image together with the Hapax Phaenomenon itself - a minimum of two images - for any item in the collection thus exposed. The potential for future postings from the ensuing results raises the spectre of a mise-en-abyme.

# Selections from *Hapax Phaenomena* (2011), John Cayley and Clement Valla



*Literal vectoralist appropriation. Screenshots, 2012. Vested vectoralist interests and prejudices reach right down into the composition of words that are proper to the writer and reader, as far as the letter itself. (John Cayley)*

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14

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