Delete Me

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We live in an era of cheap digital storage, online-first everything, and widespread use of artificial intelligence. Personal data collection has become excessive, and with it – I believe we face an increased risk of harm. The more we rely on the internet, the more data governments and companies accumulate about us. At the same time, their ability to process that data quickly, cheaply, and intelligently is improving rapidly with recent advancements in A.I. This work is an attempt to manifest my own digital footprint into a physical form for the sole purpose of imagined destruction. My hope is that *Delete Me* not only has the power to educate viewers on the scale and distributed nature of mass data collection in the United States, but that its interactive components also provide an emotional outlet for those of us wrestling with the impracticality of digital privacy in modern society.

Description

Earlier in my career, I worked on news feed personalization at Facebook. The models that I helped build there would train on a user's entire history of interactions (every click, scroll, and view from Facebook, Instagram, any website with a Facebook cookie). We developed a best-in-class understanding of our users' interests. These "interest profiles" – as we called them – help Facebook deliver hyper personalized content to keep people scrolling. Over time, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the impact of my work and concerned with how widespread "surveil-

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lance capitalism" has become (Zuboff 2018). Addictive technology and invasive targeting have the power to control people, communities, and democracies (Boorstein et al. 2023).

Big data is invisible and (in the US) the entities that aggregate, manipulate, and sell information about us are also often invisible. Because digital rights regulation in the United States is severely lacking (Bellamy 2023), managing one's vast and distributed volume of personal data can feel hopeless.

This project is my entry-point into thinking about data collection critically and doing it from a personal lens. Much of my research was focused on the systems of commercial digital tracking and profiling that exist in the United States and abroad. I also incorporated my experiences as a software engineer and AI researcher embedded in Silicon Valley, where I saw firsthand how personal information is collected, handled, and shared – typically without care for the individual. User data is recorded constantly, aggregated from many sources, inferences are made, and this information is shared between platforms and companies. Most people have no insight into this system, and none of us have much recourse (Pew Research Center 2019).

I look to the principles of GDPR (the EU's General Data Protection Regulation), as a reference for what is possible in the realm of digital rights. In particular, I am frustrated with how the US falls short on the principles of storage minimization, data retention, and the "right to be forgotten" (GDPR 2016). Data brokers are not only legal in the US, but major government agencies are some of their top customers. The US Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are among a wide range of federal entities known to purchase our personal data (Cameron 2023).

One of my biggest artistic inspirations for this work is Sarah Sze, who produces art exploring our relationship with the digital/physical boundary and manages to turn objects of clutter into fine art (Arn 2023). To me, there exists a strong parallel between excess digital data collection and physical hoarding.

Other sources of inspiration include: Jennifer Morone, who made herself into a corporation to protect her personal data (Kesteven, 2018); and Owen Mundy, who employs a thermal printer to shed light on mass data aggregation and the commodification of online users in his piece *Terms and Conditions of Use* (Mundy 2013).

Technical Implementation

Delete Me is an interactive sculpture. I first manifest my own digital footprint into a physical form and then invite participants to help me "delete" it. The project has taken on two forms thus far. The first version was a paper-based installation in New York City in May 2023; the second, a food-based sculpture, *Del(eat) Me*, in Shanghai June 2023.

My work began with some simple questions: What data can I find about myself? How can I process & reproduce that data physically to emphasize scale?
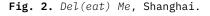
I attempted to catalogue all websites and technology platforms I have ever used. I requested and downloaded over 50GB of data from Amazon, Meta, Google, Apple, Venmo, TikTok, Airbnb, Verizon, Uber, Hinge, and Epsilon (a data broker). I used Python to process, compress, and

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reformat the data. I then performed a series of "manifest and destroy" experiments with different physical materials. I landed on a combination of thermal paper, manual shredding, and black paint as the best materials balancing safety and satisfaction. This formed the foundation of the NYC installation, where I printed all 50+GB onto thermal receipt paper, and invited the public to shred/tear/paint/rip it.

Fig. 1. *Delete Me*, NYC.

For version 2, I wanted to use a more playful and inviting medium, where my data was actually legible. For this installation, I made the most of NYU Shanghai's new maker-space and experimented with laser cutting edible objects. The result: I turned my most intimate snippets of internet search history into a bountiful breadbasket for the public to consume.

Fig. 2. *Del(eat) Me*, Shanghai.

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1. https://deletemydata.io/

Fig. 3. *Delete Me*, NYC.

Conclusion

I came into this work with the hypothesis that people would care a lot more about their digital footprint (from a privacy and utility standpoint) if they saw it manifested in a physical form.

In the NYC installation, I was able to teach participants about the data collection ecosystem in the United States and spark dozens of fruitful conversations about digital rights. To promote action, the exhibit included a plate of cookies with QR codes printed on them – a physical manifestation of browser cookies – directing viewers to deletemydata.io[1], where they could find instructions on how to remove themselves from various data marketplace websites. Viewers resonated with the work – they understood how deleting this one physical manifestation does nothing just as removing your data from a single company does not guarantee universal deletion. They felt satisfaction cranking the paper shredder, ripping receipts off the wires, and covering data with thick black paint. The sculpture evolved over the course of the 2-day exhibit into a wonderful chaotic mess.

I believe the NYC edition of *Delete Me* successfully conveyed the overwhelming scale of the data and demonstrated the value of collective destruction. However, it relied on exaggerated fear and anger to paint an oversimplified picture of all data collection as bad – all data as something that should be erased.

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Fig. 4. *Del(eat) Me*, Shanghai.

With the Shanghai edition of *Del(eat) Me*, I set out to make the data itself legible – highlighting selective files that I actually wish to delete – and to experiment with a more playful form of deletion: eating. I pulled search query history from a Google account that I have actively used since middle school, and printed my searches onto slices of bread. Unfortunately, bread adopts a rather sour taste when laser cut and the internet disagrees on whether or not it is safe to eat, so I wasn't able to capture the public consumption of my internet search history as initially intended.

Nevertheless, viewers found the installation entertaining and provocative. The search queries were relatable and entertaining, although lacked an explicit educational component to provide context on the larger digital tracking ecosystem. The tone of Version 2 was lighter and the takeaways were more abstract. This was important to me given the cultural and political differences around privacy in China vs the US. For many, the exhibit was simply cute & funny. But for some – it prompted more serious discussions on data surveillance. One viewer even came back for the second day of the show because he kept ruminating on the exhibit and wanted to ask me "Why bread?"

I chose to work with food because I wanted to introduce a sense of levity to an otherwise distressing topic. Bread is a basic building block of meals around the world – a universal symbol of sharing. I spent months researching all of the ways that data collection can cause harm and our lack of control over it. But Internet history – my data – doesn't need to be so scary. I chose to put my most intimate web history on display for the public so that the data itself would become less daunting.

Through this work I have come to accept that my data will be collected and shared beyond my control, making the fight for controls and protections even more important. I remain passionate about digital rights and plan to continue researching in this space. In particular, iterating on my central question: What is the impact of experiencing one's data in a physical form?

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