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Lift 2014: Algorithm Soup

Speakers at this year's Lift conference explored how to design conversations with algorithms, art with algae, and workplaces without screens.

SUMMARY

THE ALGORITHM FETISH Algorithmic culture was a major talking point at this year's Lift conference. Several speakers warned against fetishising algorithms, which are ultimately "caricatures".

CHANGE CONTRADICTS CORE VALUES "We are seeing subtle but important changes in our relationships with and our postures towards algorithmic systems. But those changes are at odds with some of the core values we've been building into our technology and innovation," says Alexis Lloyd of The New York Times R&D Lab.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY We must develop a fuller understanding of systems that make decisions on our behalf, argues Lloyd. By over-simplifying tech, we are removing ourselves from several important conversations.

HUMAN BANDWIDTH The sensor revolution, coupled with a wider move away from screens and towards "human bandwidth", will have a clear impact on businesses and society in coming years, according to global design firm Fjord.
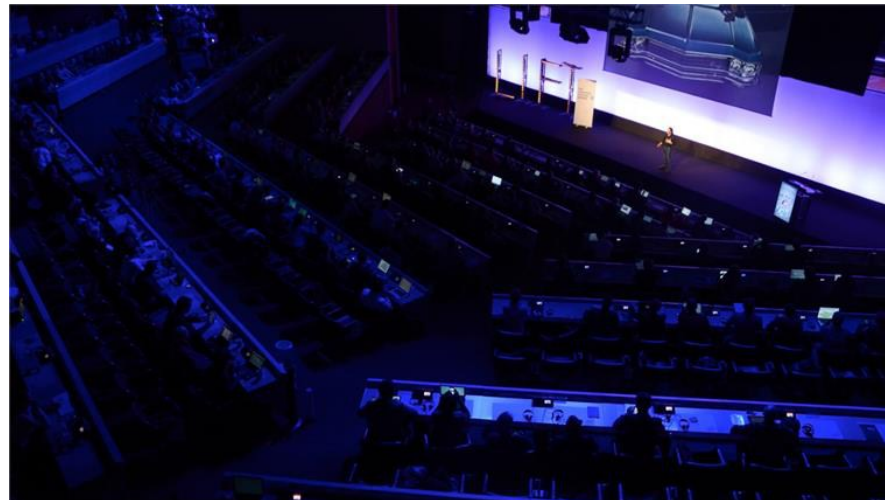
Lift 2014

Algorithmic Culture

Algorithms – and their influence on culture – provoked intense debate at this year's Lift event. US video game designer Ian Bogost issued a clear warning to audience members: do not fetishise algorithm culture. "An algorithm is a caricature," he said. The problem with algorithms, added New York-based writer Joanne McNeil, is that they make assumptions without asking what our values are.

Meanwhile, services such as the birthday reminders issued by social network Facebook are starting to make us feel like 'bots', McNeil noted. Is it inevitable, she asked, that Facebook eventually remembers on our behalf and outsources activities we once considered key to maintaining relationships?

Stylus

Ian Bogost

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ALEXIS LLOYD, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE NEW YORK TIMES R&D LAB

Lloyd argued that we must understand systems that make decisions on our behalf. As they become more pervasive, getting it wrong becomes more problematic. Many 'black boxes' are simply not intelligent enough to carry out tasks they were not explicitly designed to do or even to communicate clearly with other devices. As a result, growing numbers of consumers are already contorting their behaviours to get the most out of algorithms – such as by deliberately mispronouncing a friend's name to use voice-activated search, which might fail to grasp local accents. The question is: how much of our culture will become an adaptation to systems we can't negotiate well?

The middle ground, said Lloyd, includes services such as Ghostery, a browser app that lets people see exactly how their data is being used. CV Dazzle, a service developed by New York-based artist Adam Harvey, takes a more aggressive approach: it uses fashion as a camouflage from face-recognition, allowing individuals to assert their free will by hacking their appearances.

Rather than seeing algorithmic systems as tools, servants or invisible masters, we are beginning to view them as "empowered actors in a network where our voice is just one signal" amid a tangle of sensors. "People are becoming not masters of devices, but human nodes on a ubiquitous and distributed network – and this fundamentally changes our relationship with technology and information," Lloyd concluded.

Currently, "systems are designed so that complexity is abstracted away from the end user," said Lloyd. And in the process of simplification, we are removing ourselves from several important conversations. Lloyd suggested that designers create interactions that help the average user engage with complexity, rather than hide from it. To do that, we must adhere to the following design principles: transparency, agency and virtuosity.

Ultimately, our visions of the future must anticipate cultural changes. As an example, Lloyd highlighted a forward-looking tech concept from the 1960s that enabled women to shop online. However, the e-commerce prototype also required women to submit receipts to their husbands.

Alexis Lloyd

Joanne McNeil

You Are the Interface

Stylus

What happens when the artificial interface disappears? That was the question posed at a thought-provoking workshop led by global design firm Fjord. Organisers set the design challenge of reimagining the corporate learning experience in a world without screens. Responses ranged from ingestible intelligence – pills that download the genius of Apple co-founder Steve Jobs – to a sleep-based communications network, enabled by mind-reading technology.

The team also presented excerpts from Fjord's 2014 trends report, which highlights how business and society might change in coming years. Key directions included:

- **In Conversation with Objects:** The sensor revolution is coming. "Smartified" objects will begin to nudge behaviours by translating our data into better decisions.
- **Invisible Money:** As virtual currencies start to replace cash, consumers will look to brands for help in managing their digital footprints.
- **You are the Interface:** How can we make use of "human bandwidth" in a world where screens are out and skin is in? The answer might lie in using irises to verify identity or the voice as a remote control.

LG HomeChat app

Algae-Graphies

French artist Lia Giraud offered visual inspiration with Algae-Graphies – a series of "living photographs", created by using algae to capture light and develop images by applying traditional photography principles. Though the project was launched back in 2011, its vivid green bio-aesthetic feels remarkably fresh. One speaker found beauty in the transience of the images: Lloyd of The New York Times commented on the "poignancy of living algae images that deteriorate over time". That sense of symbiosis, of creating with biology, is becoming increasingly relevant to the growing global community of citizen scientists.

For more on the potential applications of algae in interior design, art installations and architecture, see Unlocking Algae.

Algae-Graphies

Algae-Graphies

Algae-Graphies

FUTURE INSIGHTS

PREPARE FOR CULTURAL SHIFTS Our visions of the future must anticipate cultural changes. It is not enough to focus solely on technology.

SIMPLIFY SYSTEMS Follow the design principles of transparency, agency and virtuosity to create interactions that help the average user engage with complexity, rather than hide from it.

ALGAE AESTHETICS Draw visual inspiration from microorganisms such as algae, which have a vivid green bio-aesthetic.

YOU ARE THE INTERFACE It's time to start designing for a world without screens, where the human body and its biometric data control security, technology and more.

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