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The Word Made Digital: Paper 2

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A Nostalgic Listserv Archive in Basic HTML, Very Excited About Internet

The Listserv as Digital Medium

1 an image generated by DALL·E using the title of this paper as a prompt

The listserv, as a medium, is a complex interactive space where communications seem relatively free flowing, with powers of community building and identity sharing, but, on the other hand, constrains the discussions in subtle ways. As a space, it has been theorized as a unique setting for the formation of the identity of a community, but also as a space where a certain amount of conformity is required. The identity of the group is constantly at stake, and this identity is in part determined by the communications with the other communities, and by the degree of communication with individuals, including both individual to community and community to individual communication.

Discussion

In this article we have reviewed communication among and between stakeholders in community health networks and analyzed the role of the listserv in these processes. The discussion we have presented here is intended as an analysis of the use of the listserv as a specific communication channel. It is important to underline that our analysis is based on a single cases study, with a limited number of participants, a limited set of information and a brief time span of the experiment. Our analysis of the listserv, and its role, has to be seen as preliminary and exploratory. A full analysis of the relationship between different participants on the listserv requires a larger scale study that would allow for statistical modeling. We consider this work a proof of concept for the feasibility of future work in this area.

The results of our analysis of the listserv allow us to consider both positive and negative aspects of this communication media, and to suggest areas for future research and analysis. In the following section we try to identify these contributions and provide an outline for future research.

<u>Improving the usefulness of the Listserv</u>

As a communication channel, the listserv has proven to be an important aspect of community health network life, and provides both a new sense of community to those involved in these networks, as well as a way to share their knowledge with the wider community. For example, we are developing a database of the members of the health network, in order to collect information that can be used for future needs assessment, e.g. the need for services.

The listserv, unlike the email, provides infrastructure for members to communicate with one another. Members can post, exchange emails, etc. through the listserv's various communication functions. But unlike the email where a party can send an email to many recipients, on the listserv a party can only send an email to the recipients who have joined the listserv. A party can subscribe to a listserv to receive emails from the listserv's other subscribers, but subscribers cannot opt out from their own subscription. Thus, if an organization such as the plaintiffs want to send an email to the whole world, it must send it to all of the world's users of e-mail. And when a member sends an email to the listserv, that member is automatically subscribed to the listserv, and anyone can then email that member.

Take, for example, an email sent to the Mendele Yiddish listserv the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill asking how to create the "longest possible" single word sentence composed of all the Hebrew letters. There was no discussion, no exchange, only the "solution" sent back with a message. "What I need is: 1) the longest (if possible) sentence in all Hebrew letters using English language, 2) I need a solution that I can write in a single line for an example

in this manner: 'לערבבי לערבבי לערבבי לערבבי ישובי אלוקים המחונם המחונים' (see below). I know I can write much longer and fancier sentences. Thank you very much. I am really appreciated."

Not surprisingly, the email went unanswered and the original poster did not comment on the email in the comments section. However, the original posting was picked up by a blogger and then by a news agency who all found ways to comment on it. The article about the email in the Jewish Daily Forward quoted the original poster's email.

What's surprising about this story is that even though the original poster never responded to the emails about the sentence, no one else wrote to ask him why he posted it or for more information. After all, we're all curious and even though we get answers on email lists and newsgroups, you never know when you might be talking to someone with an interesting comment, a rare story, or an example of an unusual spelling that will make you smile. Even if they have no interest in talking, a courteous response to someone who has offered to share their information is always nice

When given the text of a real listserv email, the neural network will attempt to match its style and continue its line of thought. It can be programmed to create text from an infinite range of topics, including poetry.

A neural network program has been created, in the form of an artificial mind. It can learn from previous conversations it has had with humans, and has been programmed to create new responses. It has been designed to be easily expanded with additional neural networks to form a large network of communicating minds. Its ability to learn will be expanded as it learns from a larger number of conversations and exchanges.

The mind of a neural network is not sentient in the traditional sense, nor is it omniscient in the sense of possessing true understanding or insight into a given subject. The mind has no

awareness of its own existence. That said, it can learn and understand what is told to it and will

try to act and respond in the ways that a person would act and respond in given situations.

A neural network based on a given personality will act in accordance with the

individual's past reactions:

I am doing some research on the translations of Oscar Wilde's works into Yiddish

and Hebrew. So far, I have been able to find a number Wilde's works translated and

presented by Jewish figures like David Frischman, Kalman Marmor, Bal-

Makhshoves, Yoel Entin and Avraham Frumkin. These books were published

between 1905-1925 in places like London, New-York, Warsaw and Berlin. I am

wondering if anyone has already done research on this topic and compiled a

bibliographic list of Wilde translations in books and journals. Also, were Wilde's

plays (especially "Salome") produced in Yiddish and Hebrew during this period?[1] I

am a graduate student of literature at Brown University and am working on a thesis that

studies the intersection between Wilde and Jewish culture and how this interconnection

was perceived and interpreted at different points in time by Jews who lived in Germany,

England and the United States. Would you be able to point me to any resources that you

may have concerning Wilde and Jewish culture? I would very much appreciate it. I am

sure there are many more people than me that will be glad to communicate with you

about Wilde translations into Yiddish and Hebrew. I hope that you will not mind if I also

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[1] This is an excerpt from a real email sent to the Mendele listserv: Shachar Pinsker, "Oscar Wilde in Yiddish and Hebrew," July 11, 2008, https://mailman.yale.edu/pipermail/mendele/2008-July/000015.html. These footnotes are *not* generated with GPT-NeoX 20B.

give you some of my contributions, in case it can be of help: (i) a bibliography of Wilde's works in Yiddish and Hebrew that I have gathered from various sources (ii) and a list of Wilde translations in books and journals in Yiddish and Hebrew (iii) a discussion of Wilde's reputation in Yiddish and Hebrew in the Yiddish and Hebrew press and (iv) a translation of Wilde's "Salome" by Yosef Werdiger in Yiddish. I believe that the Yiddish translation of Salome was the first one in Yiddish, but I may be wrong. I am doing research on Wilde's work in Yiddish and Hebrew and wondering whether anyone has already put together a bibliography of translations of his work. In particular, I am looking for any work in progress and completed translations in Yiddish and Hebrew. I have made a list of Wilde translations here (sorry for the length) but I am not sure if it has already been compiled by someone. I am not finding a bibliographical work.

The listserv often enforces rules for usage, by which all subscribers are expected to abide. These rules may include abstaining from profanity, not advertising in posts, and not posting sexually explicit images. The discussion list should be treated as a public space, and posts that include such content will be removed or edited. (The administrators of the list will work with the list owner to determine appropriate actions.) Listowner Policy The list owner sets the goals of the list and decides how these goals are to be accomplished, in consultation with the group. Respect other listowners and their decisions. Avoid heated discussions. Respect group consensus. Don't post your own ideas or suggestions without prior consent from the list owner, and try to present ideas in a positive light. The list owner has the final say about any issue. Respect the moderator. Be aware that discussions on newsgroups and mailing lists are not "forums" that foster conversation between the subscribers. The list owner has the right to impose rules:

To minimize wear and tear on the untershames, three requests: 1. Send time-sensitive notices well in advance. 2. Send material as plain text: no HTML, other coding, or attachments. 3. Correspond directly with the person who or organization which has posted the notice, *not* with your ever-beleaguered untershames.[2] Please only post one notice to the Unternehmen-L mailing list in a day; posting individual notices in response to each article or post is unnecessary and will only waste time that could be put to better use elsewhere. The Unternehmen-L mailing list is managed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. To subscribe, send a message to "Newsflash" at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 1120 H Street, N.W., Washington DC 20001. If you choose to forward the mailing list to someone, please include the instructions for doing so.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Molly Caudle,

Underwriters' Review,

Washington, DC,

202-662-8180 fax – 202-662-8185 email - molly.caudle@ur.org

The comparison between the digital listerv archive and the physical archive of a collection of correspondence reveals interesting ideas about early digital space. The digital listserv archive in effect replicates the physical correspondence archive in how it is stored,

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[2] These are the real rules that precede every Mendele listserv digest and can be found at the start of any thread in the archives: "The Mendele Archives," accessed November 22, 2022, https://mailman.yale.edu/pipermail/mendele/.

maintained and presented. It still depends on a "space," often owned and operated by an institution. It requires similar standards of maintenance and mediation. Yet these digital archives are much more accessible than the physical archive. If you think of the physical archive as the primary place where someone finds the letters and then proceeds to the digital archive, the physical archive is the secondary space, that which is made available after the primary access. In the case of the digital archive, there is no intermediate state because the digital collection is the primary medium. In other words, all people can find it online. But unlike physical archives, this "place" can only be manipulated through software. There is no tool to create a new object that is a "letter" as that is the primary medium.

Digital archives are more accessible and manipulable than the physical ones because in the digital world software-centric objects can be manipulated more easily by algorithms. Since digital objects can be manipulated, what counts as a single object can be reconceptualized into many different sub-documents. However, this is not to say that the digital archive, or any digital object, is less permanent. If we think of documents as the objects of archives, the argument goes, then digital documents are only as permanent as paper documents because the software-centric documents are only accessible by software. For example, a Google search can retrieve digital documents even after they are long gone, but only if they have been saved and archived in a proper fashion. Or in the digital world, the only way to "fix" a file is to store it in a proper form or in a new, permanent document.

However, I would argue that this isn't really true. Because of the way the web works, the internet has a very short attention span. A website will appear in search results for years after the website has been lost or even stopped existing. The search engine remembers what it looked like long before it had been indexed, or saved in another format. It doesn't really matter if a website

disappears, the digital footprint that it left behind is still there for future generations to see. When a website is archived by the Internet Archive, the archive includes "snapshot" images of the website before it went away and has the searchable text on it. In other words, the digital archive can include all traces of what existed on a website in the past. As long as the site still exists, the archive will archive the contents of the website.

With paper documents, digital documents and web-based documents, they all can be "archived." However, archiving the digital documents does not require a new form of medium to create the archive. In fact, it can work with the same type of material that already exists. Since the Web Archive and Internet Archive are non-profit corporations, the idea of making new software or new hardware to help with their archiving process does not make sense. What it does depend on is good archiving practice. This means that good digital archive practice does not always need to be the same as a print archive. It only requires some basic procedures to be followed to make sure that documents

The listserv as a static form, that can be populated locally, on any computer and with any content reveals precisely how far it is removed from the original purpose of the listerv form as a tool for dynamic communication. The listserv offers nothing but the possibility of static access to data stored in a central list, and nothing else. We now seem to have reached a place where the term 'list' implies the notion of a database, when that is not intended. If the listerv is now a tool for the storage of static data, then I am sorry to say that I must conclude that its concept is flawed, or that it is a re-invented wheel.

It is clear that the Internet has not lived up to its promise as an egalitarian tool that would make the communication of ideas as easy as the sending of a letter, or a phone call. Instead, it

appears that the Internet is more about making money, so that corporations can continue to milk the public with their ever more invasive technology (from credit cards, to cell phones to spyware).

The Internet has been exploited by some of the very people who were supposed to be on the side of freedom and democracy. Corporations that exploit the Internet are doing nothing but trying to expand their already enormous profits. When corporations begin to be our only means of communicating with each other and the rest of the world, our democratic way of life is lost. When we have no access to our democratic ways of thinking, then our democratic institutions and governmental systems fail.

Many people like to point out that the Internet may become a more democratic tool in the future, and some people see it that way. But that is like thinking that the airplane will someday be a simple way of getting from one place to another, and not the vehicle of death it is today.

The Internet as an information tool is an idea that died before it ever began, or at least it has become a tool that is in the hands of the few, who have made the information system of the future a tool that serves them, rather than the people. The Internet is in many ways like the telephone.

Discussion

The above paper was almost entirely written (composed? assembled? sequenced?) by the GPT-NeoX 20B neural network. Supplied with the selections of text in bold, written by the author and, in two cases, other human writers, the GPT would output the above texts. These were then manually ordered to constitute the paper. Line breaks output form the GPT were preserved—the first "Discussion" was the GPT's—and rarely was additional whitespace added. The block quotes were added by me, as well as a few semi-colons. The purpose of these additions were to improve the paper's readability without strongly detracting from its "machine-made" flavor. Lastly, the GPT was not trained on specific data for this project, but a bibliography is provided for the sake of comparison. Sometimes it seems you can hear the voice of GPT-NeoX 20B in these human-written texts.

GPT-NeoX 20B proves capable of outputting legible text that follows a perceptible train of thought, opinion, or argument (see, for example, the delightful argument on page 10), though with the occasional contradiction and not infrequent factual error. This much is clear after a very short time of experimenting with the generator, giving it different kinds of text, different syntax, altering punctuation, and so on. I was particularly interested in style or genre replication and variance. Prompted by a sentence foreshadowing an example email—"**Take, for example, an email sent to the Mendele Yiddish listserv**" (3)—will the GPT follow the "Yes, and…" law of improv and simulate the voice of an email? Not quite. It will preserve the perspective of the discussant, the author. Yet, if you provide an excerpt from an email (5), it will replicate its style to a tee. Sometimes, however, this is to a ridiculously and arguably pointless specificity, as shown by the GPT output for the Mendele listserv usage rules (7), which provides an email signature complete with a fictional email address, fax, and telephone number.

In composing such a paper that aims to touch upon a handful of points in a particular order and over a certain amount of space (as in, not all in the same paragraph), the GPT is unwieldly. Hence why individual ideas were input as individual prompts. Yet this still leaves the issue of transitions unresolved (as they often are in human-written papers). How, for example, can I provide a second email example without a full paragraph introduction by the GPT? Can the GPT learn the "appropriate" number of examples required? If I prompted the GPT with a Once Upon a Time folktale, would it abide by the "rule of three," or would it output the "Two Little Pigs"? Thus, I opted for a metafictive transition: "**When given the text of a real listserv email, the neural network will attempt to match its style and continue its line of thought**" (4).

Lastly, what if anything can we learn from the GPT about writing or about listservs? In my attempt to illicit an opinion about the specific paradox of a static listserv archive, populated by static text created entirely by one user (9)—in essence an imaginary listserv community stored on a local machine and not accessible to others unless placed on a server and made known to others, such as the one I designed for project 2.5 and 3.0—GPT-NeoX 20B failed to formulate a relevant opinion. This is a provocative case for contemplation for it says more about poor human communication than machine communication. I failed to articulate, as I and other humans often do, precisely what I mean. GPT-NeoX 20B and other text generators can, until they are refined, be used fruitfully as automated proofreaders that would verify or, in most cases, reveal the incongruities in human thought and expression. As for the listserv, it is hard to say that anything particularly interesting was generated. The generator does not seem to be sufficiently trained to associate the disjointed topics we wished to assimilate. This leads one to wonder if there is simply a lack in texts that analyze this medium in the way we would like to discuss them

here. Or if, the human mind is too closed to accept the direction this artificial intelligence would

like to take it.

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