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"LET THEM EAT CAKE!!"  
SHE SAID.

Audrey Samson and Francisco Gallardo





"Let them eat cake!" she retorted, as she was told the peasants had no more bread to eat. According to the myth, Marie-Antoinette, the French Queen, was so detached from her subjects that she thought if the staple had run out, they should simply eat a more luxurious foodstuff like cake. The politics of power and their relationship to food are expressed in this well know phrase. Furthermore, in pre-revolutionary France, the restaurant was not a place for delicate appetites, it was a dish that was restaurative, quasi-medicinal bouillon. It was served in spaces of frugal, radically minded hospitality<sup>1</sup>. Two generations after Marie-Antoinette, the French guillotined the royalty, an unsavory end for the blue bloods. Yet, as dessert remains "a purely cultural phenomenon"<sup>2</sup>, we can't help but wonder how the notion of cake could reflect our current socio-political milieu.

The news abounds with stories of privacy lost to surveillance, 'for our protection'. The servers are overflowing with bits of us, analysed, categorised, and used for profit in data

modeling. The magic porridge pot is bubbling and boiling, spilling over, streams of data, "Little pot, stop!" What is more, these data streams are being served back to us, in algorithmically calculated ways: emotional contagion experiments,<sup>3</sup> augmenting political polarisation,<sup>4</sup> adjusting content visibility depending on its source, and its format,<sup>5</sup> etc. These are some of the ways in which Facebook curates your News Feed.

We are the subjects of mass surveillance. Data fornicates, replicating at quantum speeds, multiplying our memories in corporate server farms, sold to the highest bidder or even leaked for free. Could the metabolising of data assuage the anxiety of this datafication? Meanwhile, vast resources are being allocated to the development of new forms of data storage to accommodate the capacity requirements of this data analysis frenzy. Synthetic DNA is the proposed solution to Big Data's big storage problem. Its high-density information encoding capacity, stable format, and low maintenance properties are fueling the

promise of near infinite, never-deprecating storage.<sup>6</sup> For the first time, data will be truly embodied, with the code of life itself. In short, DNA presages the Facebook server farms of the future.

Digest that!

In early 2012, Facebook conducted massive scale emotional contagion by manipulating the emotional expressions in the News Feeds of 689,003 users.<sup>7</sup> Essentially, half the group was exposed to less of their friends' positive emotional content in their News Feed, and the other half was exposed to less negative emotional content. They found that the emotions expressed by friends via online social networks influenced the mood of the user. None of these users were asked for permission to conduct the experiment because it falls under Facebook's terms of agreement. How were you feeling between January 11th and 18th, 2012? Craving for chocolate? Cake?

Governability and the biopolitics of everyday life flow through the many layers of shared images, liked videos,

protocols, and hyperlinks, all orchestrated by the Facebook News Feed algorithm. Hard to swallow? What if we sugar coated it? How about a mouthwatering Yuk n Yum version of your social media-self?



#### HOW DOES IT WORK?

Since 2010 it is possible to download a copy of the data Facebook has amassed about you, under your profile's General Account Settings. To make your cake, that data is encoded in DNA strings with software.<sup>8</sup> The code is used to fabricate synthetic DNA (XNA), the same substance that is being proposed for mass data storage. Essentially digital data is translated into synthetic DNA form (adenine, cytosine, thymine and uracil). The XNA is based on ribose, a simple carbon sugar. The substance, containing a copy of the participant's digital traces, is added to the sugar



used in the recipe. The data categories from each profile are transposed into cake layers, with an absurd twist that reflects the algorithms agency. The Facebook categories that form the cake layers are: Add Topics: A list of topics that you may be targeted against based on your stated likes, interests and other data you put in your Timeline.

**Facial Recognition Data:** A unique number based on a comparison of the photos you're tagged in. This data is used to help others tag you in photos.

**Followers:** A list of people who follow you.

**Following:** A list of people you follow.

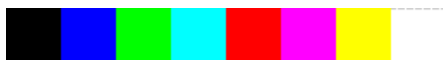
**Friends:** A list of your friends.

**Likes on Others' Posts:** Posts, photos or other content you've liked.

**Likes on Your Posts from others:** Likes on your own posts, photos or other content.

**Political Views:** Any information you added to Political Views in the About section of Timeline. (Source: <https://www.facebook.com/help/405183566203254/>)

We introduce a non-cognitivist set of culinary instructions in order to viscerally disarm the intelligence hiding behind Facebook's affordable computability. In the spirit of absurdity, the layers are ordered alphabetically. A 3-bit color is assigned to each one:



Layer thickness expresses quantifiable information, and layer taste is the fruit of our fanciful imaginations. The top layer, containing the *Ad Topics* data, represents approximately 85% of the cake's thickness because this data accounts for 85% of Facebook's total revenue,<sup>9</sup> this layer is particularly sweet. The *Facial Recognition* data is a thin, nearly invisible layer of extra-sour citrus flavoured gelatine. It helps circumvent *PhotoTagger*<sup>10</sup> as your face becomes less symmetrical when grimacing. How individuals are connected in the network structures the flow of information on Facebook.<sup>11</sup> The *Followers and Following* data follow what we call a social networking power ratio. Therefore, if you have more followers than people you are following, you may be considered of higher network value by the algorithm. Your *Followers* layer

will therefore be thicker and sweet, the *Following* layer will be thin and also taste sweeter. The *Friends* layer's thickness depends on how many you have compared to the average in your age group.<sup>12</sup> The *Likes from* and *Likes to* follow the *social networking power ratio* described above, the more *Likes from*, the thicker the layer and the sweeter the taste. The bottom layer contains the *Political View data*, it is the thinnest and tastes of salty black licorice. The latter is often given to children in Northern European countries when they have a sore throat. The News Feed algorithm filters out news you are less likely to agree with, 5% of stories if you identify as a conservative and 8% if you identify as liberal.<sup>13</sup>



Upset by the news? Have a licorice...  
Following Hannah Landecker's notion of food as a conditioning

environment that shapes the activity of the genome and the physiology of the body,<sup>14</sup> we use cake as exposure to social media politics. The designed and manufactured sets of molecules that compose food exist in the cloud in which we are immersed. Metabolism can be a source to understand circuits of exchange, in short, the biopolitics of matter. Making data edible emphasises its materiality. Our memories and identities are increasingly externalised in hard drives and networked databases, used to analyse and manipulate us. We use data metabolism as a zone of contestation, to experience the absurdity of quantification. In other words, we are having our cake, and eating it too! What would your Facebook profile taste like?

*Bonne appétit!*

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**NOTES:**

1. Spang, Rebecca L. 2000. *The Invention Of The Restaurant*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

2. Krondl, Michael. 2011. *Sweet Invention*. Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press.

3. Kramer, A. D. I., J. E. Guillory, and J. T. Hancock. 2014.

'Experimental Evidence Of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks'. *Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences* 111 (24): 8788-8790.



instances of where the user is tagged, as well as instances where other friends are tagged. Currently, Facebook has undertaken research projects such as DeepFace (scoring human-like accuracy) or sophisticated neural networks that allow to identify subjects through more-than facial attributes. See: [https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27761-](https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27761-facebook-can-recognise-you-in-photos-even-if-youre-not-looking#.VYlMFPF8YI)

4. Bakshy, E., S. Messing, and L. A. Adamic. 2015. 'Exposure To Ideologically Diverse News And Opinion On Facebook'. *Science* 348 (6239): 1130-1132.

5. Facebook personalises the News Feed based on people's preference for watching video, likes, comments, etc. See: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/06/news-feed-fyi-showing-better-videos/>. Also, see Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*, for a critical account of how personalisation is controlling and limiting information.

6. Goldman, Nick, Paul Bertone, Siyuan Chen, Christophe Dessimoz, Emily M. LeProust, Botond Sipos, and Ewan Birney. 2013. 'Towards Practical, High-Capacity, Low-Maintenance Information Storage In Synthesized DNA'. *Nature* 494 (7435): 77-80.

7. Kramer, A. D. I., J. E. Guillory, and J. T. Hancock. 2014. 'Experimental Evidence Of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks'. *Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences* 111 (24): 8788-8790.

8. Arita, M. 2004. 'Writing Information into DNA.' *Aspects of Molecular Computing* 2950: 23-35.

9. See <http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/161639/facebook-gets-85-of-revenue-from-ads-including-news-orgs/> (Statistics from 2012).

10. *Photo tagger* was developed by Israeli facial recognition tech startup Face.com. The app scans faces in a given album providing users all

[facebook-can-recognise-you-in-photos-even-if-youre-not-looking#.VYlMFPF8YI](https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27761-facebook-can-recognise-you-in-photos-even-if-youre-not-looking#.VYlMFPF8YI)

11. Bakshy, E. 2015. 'Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook'. *Science* 348 (6239): 1130-1133.

12. See <http://blog.wishpond.com/post/115675435109/40-up-to-date-facebook-facts-and-stats>

13. Bakshy, E. 2015. 'Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook'. *Science* 348 (6239): 1130-1133.

14. Landecker, H. 2011. 'Food as exposure: Nutritional epigenetics and the new metabolism'. *BioSocieties* 6(2): 167-194.

Audrey Samson is an artist-researcher currently completing a PhD at the School of Creative Media in Hong Kong. Her performative installations explore how memory and technical objects are iteratively reconfigured and entangled in the context of networked data archiving. Her works are available at <http://ideacritik.com/>. She can be contacted on Twitter @ideacritik

Francisco Gallardo is an artist, engineer and cultural "thinker". He is currently a doctoral student in the School of Geography with affiliated appointments in the New Media Art and Technology Lab both at Queen Mary University and the Centre for Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths University.