# Archives and Algorithms Compressing Socio-historical Distance

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Pencil drawing.
Drawing art pencil.
What is love.
Romantic love.
Drug addiction rehabilitation.
Moral virtues.
Catholic virtues.
Panini sandwich recipes.
–Erica Scourti, *Life in AdWords*

In 2012, multimedia artist Erica Scourti dictated this disjointed list in a performance video titled *Life in AdWords*. In the scene that features this audible statement, the artist is shown seated in the right third of the screen. Her hair is tousled, and she sits at arm's length from her webcam (fig. 1). A large studio space is visible in the background, with light streaming into windows located behind her. Each of Scourti's curt statements is spoken in monotone with a blank facial expression, leaving them to hang inconclusively in her open and bright setting. The words Scourti repeats are in fact advertising keywords, also known as adwords, generated through her Gmail interface.

From March 2012 to January 2013, the artist emailed herself a daily diary entry and subsequently read to her webcam the keyword headlines of suggested ads that appeared in connection with the emails' content (fig. 2). The ads the artist reads throughout *Life in AdWords* range from helpful tips on her love life, to how to discover the existence of God, get rid of her
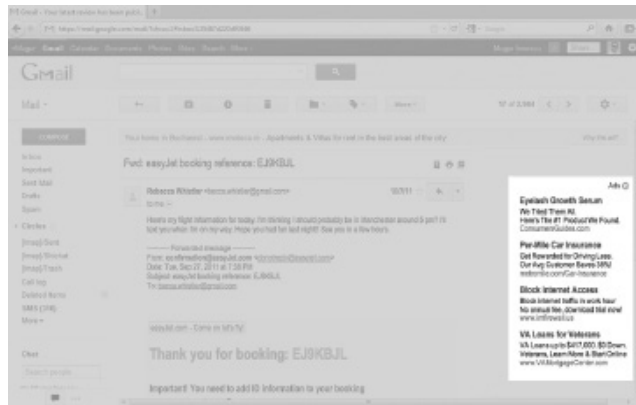
body hair "for good," or choose the best nonstick kitchen cookware. Her audience is provided with glimpses of her everyday life from the perspective of her webcam. We are privy to settings such as beach houses, her bedroom, airport lounges, and multiple artists' studio spaces, as well as a variety of hairstyles worn by the artist, ranging from bedhead to well coiffed.

  The ads that Scourti reads materialized in her email interface after Google-patented algorithmic calculations selected keywords from her diary entries and connected them with products, companies, and ideas packaged as consumer goods. Many tech companies, such as Facebook and Apple, utilize such algorithms to market products and information so that users feel that their lifestyles and personal interests are represented online. To facilitate such targeted marketing, a user's regular online behavior is tracked and mined, usually without a company's disclosing the extent to which an individual's actions are documented.[1] Users see a world of products that allegedly interest them, but they are typically unaware of the extent to which they are monitored in order to create this "personalized" environment.[2]

1 Geert Lovink, "Society of the Query: Googlization of Our Lives," in *Networks Without a Cause* (Cambridge, MA, Polity Press, 2011), 152.

2 Eli Pariser, "Introduction," in *The Filter Bubble* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 9.

Life in AdWords displays a user who subjects herself to the codes and categories of identity predefined for her by the tech companies and software designers who create data-mining algorithms. Although Scourti herself is concerned with individual virtual behavior and the surveillance of it by online service providers, the technology that she highlights correlates in important ways to the principles of legal and governmental archives that similarly taxonomize the individual and his or her social behavior. The content located in such archives is preserved by specific institutions and individuals who recontextualize the value and meaning of archived information via their reliance on the political interests, ideologies, and monetary systems by which the archive is tacitly or explicitly organized, yet such guiding factors remain detached from the information that is documented. A comparison of Scourti's work to the Alphonse Bertillon archive developed in Paris in the late 18th century illustrates some of the ways in which archiving practices have perpetuated such ideological categorization, which in turn schematizes institutional control over the individual.

  The Bertillon archive was founded in Paris in 1893, when the photographic records of imprisoned criminals were rapidly accumulating without a proper storage space or a system through which to retrieve individual files. To mitigate this problem, police official

Alphonse Bertillon developed a specially-designed archival cabinet to organize the records, and conducted phrenological readings and bodily measurements of the criminals in custody to further distinguish one record from another (fig. 3). Each criminal's skull, arm span, and height, along with the shape of ears, gender, and race were documented and plotted against the data of other criminals (figs. 4, 5).

Considered from the perspective of 2016, the Bertillon archive with its use of mathematical measurements and scientific methods represents a system of social construction analogous to that examined in Scourti's video performances, because both the algorithmic calculations of the adwords and those that underpin the Bertillon archive assert an authority over individual behavior and values. Scourti's engagement with the adwords confronts such apparatuses of control that categorize the individual–not in order to suggest that the artist is free from such systems, but as a means of working within the system to ultimately defy it. Scourti's direct confrontation is precisely what the institution intends the user to forego; corporate interests expect that one will accept these external characterizations as delivered via "personalized" advertising content. An analysis of Scourti's work explores the process through which such social constructions can be subverted to propose a sense of personal and cultural agency that resists the categorizations enforced by algorithms and archives. Scourti lays the groundwork for us as viewers to consider how our autonomies are at risk as we encounter innovative technologies in which our online experiences are controlled by algorithmic selections.

The coding examined in Life in AdWords reveal a number of assumptions regarding Scourti's sexual orientation, gender, religious affiliations, and mental state. For example, Scourti repeats the phrase: "always feeling alone" and "depression-anxiety" a plethora of times throughout the video. The frequency of mental-health–related advertisements in her Gmail interface reveals that Google's coders view this topic as a successful marketing opportunity. Such markers display how coders of algorithms taxonomize identity online. A user like Scourti could have written in her diary about a "black" article of clothing or how her cat was left "alone" in her apartment all day. To an algorithm, however, such words indicate that her emails contain signs of depression.

Scourti notes that she often exclaimed "oh god" in her emailed diary entries in Life in AdWords. Gmail's algorithms then chose ads based on what could be derived from such content.[3] Scourti would see ads regarding Catholicism ("Catholic virtues") or how to search for the existence of God ("is God good?"). These algorithmic interpretations signal that certain words or phrases have been limited to particular values and interests, diminishing the

<u>**fig. 3**</u> Alphonse Bertillon, *Service* d'identification, detail, 1893.

<u>**fig. 4**</u> Alphonse Bertillon, *Measuring Head with Calipers*, c. 1887.

<u>**fig. 5**</u> Alphonse Bertillon, *Four Examples of Usefulness of Ears for Identification Over Other Changeable Attributes*, c. 1887.

user's ability to choose between or beyond these values. The abundance of over-generalized advertisements provides evidence of the rigid parameters the coders of algorithms observe in order to create a so-called "personal" online environment.

3 Erica Scourti, skype interview with author, February 28, 2016.

In his essay "On Collecting Art and Culture," scholar James Clifford accounts for a 19th century Western anthropological method that establishes categorical groupings of information and objects as a means of asserting "identity [as] a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memories, experience)."[4] His term for this methodology is "culture collecting," which he critiques as the separation of elements from their original circumstances and their preservation in an administrative format, such as collections in museums or archives. Clifford insists that collected elements are seen by institutions or governmental entities as having been rescued from disappearance; collecting them ensures that they are preserved as valuable markers of identity and culture.[5] In Life in AdWords, a user's identity as framed within the platform of Gmail is categorized according to materials, products, and companies determined as legitimate by Google's algorithms and their software coders. Google's algorithms and coders thus act as culture collectors. Scourti is assigned a mental illness, a sexual orientation, the kitchen cookware she should buy, and how she should search for a religion. Yet of course, these categorizations inevitably deny the nuances that make up her individual lived experience and the culture she is connected to outside the online environment.

4 James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture" in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 218.

5 Ibid., 231.

The social effects of culture collecting can be located in Paris in 1893, just as they were seen in Gmail at the time of Scourti's performance. Photographer and theorist Allan Sekula argues that the social divide enforced by Bertillon's archive established an ideal class and appearance.[6] As with the algorithms highlighted in Life in AdWords, Bertillon's archive dictated which individual traits could represent health and deviance in culture. The size of each criminal's skull or the length of his arms as documented in this archive determined how one was contextualized within Parisian culture at the dawn of the 20th century. These aspects solidified how individuals fit into a social hierarchy and, like the algorithms in Gmail, truncated the idiosyncratic value of a life, personality, family history, and intelligence. The control imposed by the archive and the

adwords is enforced through swift assumptions about individuals that effect how they are viewed in culture and how they see themselves. The historical distance between the Bertillon archive and <u>Life in AdWords</u> is compressed due to both cases' interest in reducing individuals to a set of standards.

6 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter, 1986): 21.

    Scourti's work presents evidence of culture collecting as it is practiced in the digital age, but she also actively defies this method of cultural regimentation by establishing categories according to her own personal standards and environment. In doing so, the artist accounts for aspects of her identity that fall outside the superficial categories embedded within familiar online interfaces. Scourti does this by presenting a stark contrast between her everyday life seen through the webcam and the constant flow of the adwords, in order to dispel any notion that the coded terms she recites in this performance could truly be expressions of autonomy.

    Over the course of this performance smaller, more localized gestures are offered for viewers' notice—such as the shifts in light through her window as she films across seasons, or the growth of her hair, or how often she wears a certain sweater (fig. 6). The adwords may be plotting her supposed interests and values, but the artist reasserts her identity through such moments that operate outside the normative taxonomies presented in Gmail. The small gestures revealed to Scourti's audience resist an easy reduction to standardized values or products; they are not imposed upon the user. The fact that viewers take notice of the growth of Scourti's hair or the reappearance of her favorite sweater marks the striking gap between the interests and personality traits that the artist herself chooses to represent and her digital reflection in an algorithmic calculation. Elements of her appearance such as "hair cuts" or "red sweaters" never show up in her adwords. Yet, for the viewer, these are the observable classifications that appear most genuine.

    Scourti's reassertion of her personality through these distinct moments in <u>Life in AdWords</u> correlates to James Clifford's interest in questioning the methods of culture collecting that use objects and ideas to "stand for" an individual or culture.[7] Clifford notes that collections of objects ultimately lead to a devaluation of culture, because it is the institution rather than the individual that decides what is worthy for commerce, or aesthetically pleasing, or useful for scientific study.[8] Associations formulated within an archive structure an idealized identity and culture that exist apart from the memories, beliefs, and traditions that the individual values as his or her own. The overabundance of generic words and

fig. 6 Erica Scourti, *Life in AdWords*, 2012–13; Still images from
video performances. https://vimeo.com/39677781.

normative categories that Scourti lists in Life in AdWords denotes the type of hollow definition that Clifford criticizes. Scourti's life could not be so simple nor so largely focused on "panini sand-wiches." To generate adwords for economic gain, algorithms and their designers value certain topics or ideas, while neglecting aspects that might be more relevant to the individual.

7 Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," 144.

8 Ibid.

    The intimate details that viewers note when watching Life in AdWords displace the corporate categorizations whose simplicity draws from traditional documentary methods of the nineteenth century. Scourti's video performance does rely on technology—the webcam, for example, with its own pre-programmed formatting—as a means to achieve an "accurate" self-representation online; in this regard, she does not suggest that users must completely separate themselves from technology and avoid data-tracking altogether. The more nuanced perceptions of her as an artist, woman, human, and user that viewers form when they notice aspects of her self-presentation like her favored sweater are produced in conjunction with the algorithmic assessments and cultural norms that remain online and offline.

    For the artist, technology is leveraged to reveal both her identity (by way of physical aspects like her staged settings and clothing) and her online environment as a technological-human endeavor. In an interview with digital media journalist Marc Garrett, Scourti comments, "...my feeling is that opting out [of data-tracking systems]—if it's even possible—can be a way of pretending none of this stuff is happening. I'm generally more interested in finding ways of working with the logic of the system."[9] Scourti re-asserts control over her body as it is produced and systematized by algorithms. The artist is indeed reliant on the adwords to uphold their part of the dialogue, but this condition of her performance provides her with an autonomy—however limited—through which she can notice and engage with personalization in technology. In doing so, she questions the progress of yet another iteration of ideological sorting associated with archival methodologies.

9 Marc Garrett, "A Life in AdWords, Algorithms & Data Exhaust. An Interview with Erica Scourti," *Furtherfield*, May 13, 2013, accessed November 11, 2015, http://www.furtherfield.org/features/interviews/life-adwords-algorithms-data-exhaust-interview-erica-scourti.

    Life in AdWords mocks a future where all human actions are calculated to exclude any unpredictable moments or personal growth. As algorithmic categorizations become more pervasive within everyday online interfaces, we make these constructions of identity invisible once we allow them to predict our next song, search query,

or movie that we want to watch on Netflix. The progression from archives to algorithms illustrates how systems of categorization have been employed to write our pasts, and thus our bodies, cultures, customs, and values for us. Scourti's work offers a way in which we might use technological calculations as resources to interrogate this prescriptive logic rather than settling for its limitations.