A Vehicle for Large-Scale Education About the Human Mind

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My first encounter with the information highway came in the form of a love letter in 1982. My boyfriend had studied artificial intelligence at Carnegie Mellon in the mid-1970s and worked at an IBM lab on the East Coast while I was in graduate school in the Midwest. He had pestered me to get an account on something called BITNET. After procrastinating, because I didn't see the point of it, there I was, connected to him without paying AT&T a penny. So that's what the Net is good for, I thought, and recommended it wholeheartedly to every couple struggling to manage a long-distance relationship.

Almost thirty years later, I cannot say that the Internet has changed, even an iota, how I think. But what the Internet has surely done is to change what I think about, what I know, and what I do. It has done so in stupendous ways, and I mention the single most significant one.

In the mid-1990s, I began working on a method for gaining access to the way in which the mind works automatically, unreflectively, less consciously. My students and I studied how thoughts and feelings about social groups (race, gender, class, age, and so on)—feelings we might consider unacceptable—nevertheless came to have a presence in our minds. This situation, we recognized, didn't result from simple obtuseness on the part of human beings; it was the mind's nature. Remarkably, I could test myself, and I learned that my own mind contained thoughts and feelings of which I was unaware, that those thoughts and feelings weren't ones I wanted to possess or was proud of, yet much as I might deny them a part of who I was.

In 1998, my collaborator Tony Greenwald and I decided it was time to develop a version of the test-called the Implicit Association Test, or IAT—for the Web. There were no models for doing this; there were no such experiments by behavioral scientists at the time. But we had talent and grit in the person of Brian Nosek a graduate student at Yale; a visionary in Phil Long, Yale's main IT overseer; and a scrupulous and effective Internal Review Board that worked through the ethical details of such a presence on the Web.

We went live on September 29, 1998, agreeing that our main purpose for placing the IAT on the Internet was not research as much as it was education. We believed that the method we had developed could provide a moment of self-reflection and learning. That if we did it right, we could engage thousands, even millions, in the task of asking where the stuff in their heads comes from, in what form it sits there, and what they may want to do about it if they don't approve of it.

In the very first days, a large news network placed a link to our site, and there was no looking back. Hundreds of people visited, sampled the IAT, and fired off their responses at us. Interactions with them about technical issues, but even more so about their reactions to the experience, forced us to write new language and modify our presentation. By the end of the first month, we were the stunned recipients of 40,000 completed IATs. We couldn't have learned what we did in that month in half a lifetime had we stayed with the traditional platform for research.

This site, whose primary purpose was educational, changed the research enterprise itself. A research question involving an alternative hypothesis posed on day one could be answered by day two because of the amount of data that flowed in. The very nature of research changed—in the collaborations that mushroomed, in the diversity...
of the people who participated, in the sheer amount we were able to learn and know at high speed.

The Internet has changed the quality of what we know and increased our confidence in our assessments of what we know. It has changed our notion of what it means to be in constant public dialog about our science. It has changed our relationships with project participants, with whom there can be a real discussion, sometimes many months after the initial interaction. It has also changed our relationship with the media, whose practitioners became research subjects themselves before communicating about the work. Most surprising was the discovery that the vast majority of visitors to the site were willing to entertain the notion that they might not know themselves. Without the Internet, we might have believed that this was the limited privilege of the intellectual elite. Now we know better.

Of course, this science will always require other forms of gathering data besides the Internet. Of course, there are serious limits to what can be done to understand the human mind using the vehicle of the Internet. But it is safe to say that the Internet allowed us to perform the first large-scale study of an aspect of social cognition. Today we have more than 11 million pieces of IAT data from implicit.harvard.edu and its predecessor site. The topics cover what the site is best known for (automatic attitudes toward age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, skin color, religion, automatic stereotypes of foreignness, math/science, career/home) as well as political attitudes in the last three presidential elections and dozens of matters concerning health, mental health, consumer behavior, politics, medical practice, business practice, legal matters, and educational interests. Any person with access to the Net and a desire to spend a few minutes locked in battle with the IAT is a potential participant in the project. Teachers and professors, corporations and nonprofits all over the world use the site for their own educational purposes.

The site yields 20,000 completed IATs per week and involves specialized sites for thirty-three countries in twenty-two languages. There are no advertisements. Somehow, people find it, and stay. They stay, we think, for the simple reason that they want to understand themselves better.