

August 5, 2022

Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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What we're thinking about

Empowering people to participate in building a better web.

Yesterday, we were joined by our friends at [The Markup](#) for the latest in our Unfinished Conversations series on Twitter. The topic was "[Pixel Hunt](#)," a franchise from [The Markup](#) investigating how Meta tracks activity across the web, and we went especially deep on a [recent piece](#) revealing how the company receives sensitive medical information from hospitals. (You can listen to the whole thing [here](#).)

The story is, of course, relevant on its own merits. It demonstrated that a large number of major hospitals in the United States utilize Meta's tracking pixel—a bit of code that collects information on a user, like whether they said they're seeing a doctor for Alzheimer's or an abortion, and sends it back to the mothership. Oftentimes, these hospitals have deployed the pixel without any real reason.

"When we reached out to the hospitals for this story, I can say confidently that none of their responses suggested to us that they were intimately familiar with exactly what the pixel was doing on their websites," Todd Feathers, one of the reporters credited on the [Markup](#) story, said during our Twitter conversation. "Quite a few removed the pixel afterwards."

This is a clear example of a couple major issues: 1) that the data surveillance economy extends into deeply personal territory, and 2) that there's so much *inertia* behind these business practices that they're often enacted without any actual intention. Individuals are trapped in this web simply by using basic services on the internet, whether they know it or not.

(These issues are some of the animating forces behind the [decentralized social networking protocol](#) our Labs team is developing. The intention is to deliver autonomy to people, allowing them to set terms for how their information can and cannot be accessed by others online.)

The story is important not just because it sheds light on *problems*, though: It's actually a wonderful example of a collaborative approach toward *solutions*. *The Markup's* Pixel Hunt series was made possible by a technical partnership with [Mozilla Rally](#) and the participation of a [few thousand volunteers](#) who installed a browser add-on that collected information about Meta's tracking. Here, a great idea blossomed into something truly substantial.


"It was really great to be involved with something that recognized that users and participants have a contribution, rather than just depending on these platforms to give us this data," Sydette Harry, who oversees communications and community at Mozilla Rally, said during our Twitter conversation. "You cannot depend on these spaces to tell you the truth about [their users], but you can show what their computers are doing to them. And that requires users to be involved. And it requires us to believe that they have important feedback. And I believe this project did so much with that."


People have power. We're not just the subjects of whatever systems tech giants decide to funnel us into.

If this message resonates, we hope you'll join us for more conversations like this at [Unfinished Live](#). Who knows: Maybe you'll make a connection there that ends up changing the digital world.



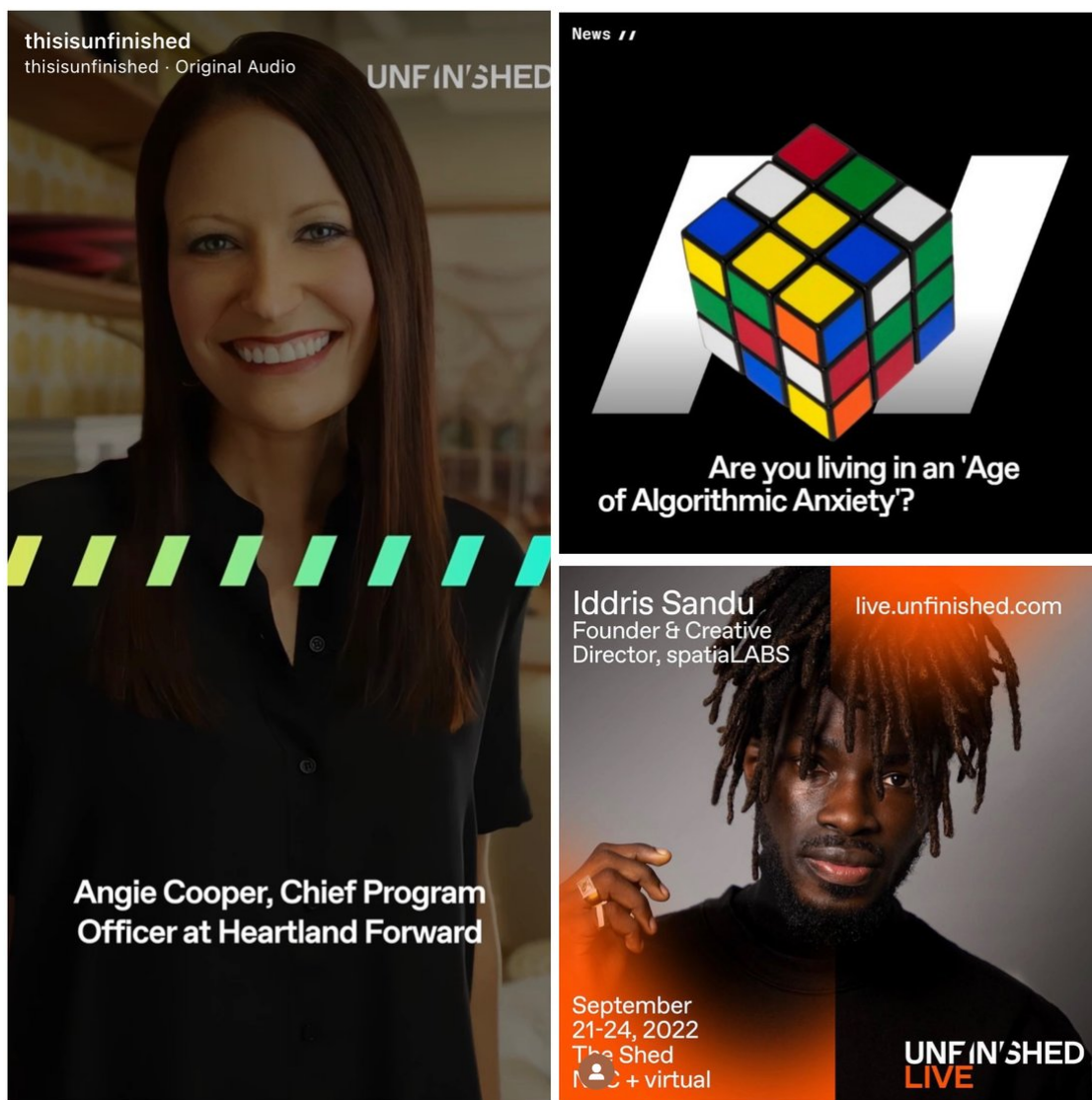
Other notable headlines

 Shoshana Wodinsky ([a recent panelist](#) in one of our Unfinished Conversations on Twitter) and Kyle Barr [reported](#) in *Gizmodo* that more than two dozen data brokers are selling information identifying a very large number of people as "actively pregnant" or "shopping for maternity products." (It's hard to say exactly how many people are implicated; *Gizmodo's* research indicates that 2.9 billion *profiles* are identified here, but, as the article notes, that certainly doesn't mean individual people — unless nearly half of everyone on the planet happens to be browsing the internet for information about having children.) It's a disquieting reminder, in the post-Roe universe, that the digital ad economy is built in part on surveilling deeply personal information that an individual might rather keep private.

 Starbucks is entering the web3 universe with "coffee-themed NFTs," *TechCrunch's* Sarah Perez [reports](#). She speculates that the digital collectibles could be tied to the company's loyalty program, perhaps giving them some genuine utility in the Starbucks ~ecosystem~. Details are scarce for now, though it's a definite sign that blockchain is becoming more mainstream-friendly.

🗣️ Shira Ovide writes in the *New York Times* about the broader implications behind new regulations that would govern online speech in Indonesia: “In three of the four most populous countries in the world, [China, India, and Indonesia,] governments have now given themselves the power to order that the internet be wiped of citizens’ posts that the authorities don’t like.” It’s classic censorship, Ovide says, though it also calls into question what appropriate interventions from governments might look like in digital space. “Our challenge,” she writes, “is to make room for governments to act in the public interest to shape what happens online when necessary, while calling them out when authorities abuse this right in order to maintain their own power.”

📱 A new look on Instagram



We’ve started to post a lot of fun new stuff over on [the official Unfinished Instagram](#): audio clips from compelling interviews, fascinating articles, exclusive Reels, and information about upcoming events like Unfinished Live. Consider this a friendly invitation to follow us there!

A message from our partners at Pop-Up Magazine

We're excited to showcase Pop-Up Magazine today as part of our community catalyst program, which promotes work at the intersection of tech, art, and impact. If you're interested in learning more, [contact us here](#).

[Pop-Up Magazine](#) is an acclaimed live magazine show—a multimedia storytelling spectacle performed onstage at historic venues across North America.

These shows feature original true stories, art, music, and performances from the world's great and emerging storytellers and journalists, accompanied by illustration, animation, film, photography, and an original score performed live by the Magik*Magik Orchestra. *Pop-Up Magazine's* recent Spring 2022 Issue featured multimedia stories covering the environment, human connection, family, and much more from Tracy Clayton, Adrian L. Burrell, Chloé Cooper Jones, Kristen Radtke and more. Stay up-to-date with the latest shows and stories from *Pop-Up Magazine* by [signing up for their free newsletter](#).

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

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