Big Data! What’s it got to do with my Chicanismo? Everything!

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Back in the height of the Chicano Movement, I met a sociologist in Denver who said, as we joined Chicano/a students in the Westside High School walk-outs, that these are the Golden Years for Chicanos and someday we will look back at these times and feel the essence of our being (our Self in a social psychological sense) and think, “You are what you were when.”
Today his message is more resounding then it was at the time. I was busy helping Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez organize protest marches at the Crusade for Justice and teaching Chicanitos and Chicanitas at the Escuela Tlatelolco about how Aztlan or the Southwestern United States was “occupied” (as Rudy Acuña puts it) by people who were systematically transforming our culture and enslaving us in forms of modern day slavery most people didn’t care about.

In the modern-day enslavement of Chicanos I see an opportunity to be what I was when – a stone-cold Chicano. The “take-over” of our culture and the advent of new technologies in big data are rapidly giving rise to a new form of the Chicano Movement—talk about Chicano Manifesto, from Google’s big data we can derive new inspirations like never before. We must rethink the notion that we are a “sleeping giant” because we are not. Through Google we are quietly creating new forms of information and knowledge and when we reassess it in new algorithmic ways we will gain new insights for keeping our Chicanismo alive, continuously transforming and adapting. Ours will also be a new form of Chicano Movement—a digitized revolution. (We need for Armando Rendón to rewrite his verbal declaration in Chicano Manifesto to fit the new mode of integrating the impact of big data.)

Think about it this way: giant data gatherers, Facebook and Google, are gathering all the data they can on all of humanity, gathering human behavior in the form of every post, inquiry, image, Youtube videos, Google Earth searches (both above and below water), articles you write, share or publish, emails, keystrokes (timing between keystrokes), subject matter searched, how much time one spends on topics, and much more—it’s the equivalent of big ticket science.

In terms of the expansion of knowledge, it is far more effective and gathers much more information and knowledge than anything we could have imagined. To be sure, we can talk about how, with the continuous advent of new technologies and scientific advances, the rate of knowledge gathering doubles every few years, but what Google is currently gathering is, in a word, insane!

Analogous to Google is the big data Facebook is gathering. As Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, recently put it: “We don’t really know what all of the information Facebook is gathering will lead us to, but we will in the near future.” Zuckerberg speaks like a space pioneer; what he is pointing to is one of the most important aspects of the scientific method, that while we are searching for the truth, we make discoveries along the way.

At a macro level of analysis, take the case of the world’s most expensive big ticket science experiment, the Hadron Super Collider Project (HSCP). When it first began, the idea was to use it to locate the Higgs Boson Particle. Particle physics had a theory about how to locate it, but it was only a theory.

What they did know was that by setting up the project and through the scientific process of searching for the Higgs Boson Particle, they would make scientific discoveries they never dreamed of—that’s how the scientific method works. You set out to find something and you land up finding all sorts of other things. The theory behind the search was that if scientists could locate the Higgs Boson Particle they could measure it and ascertain hints about the beginning of our universe a la the Big Bang Theory. Applying the scientific method (searching for the truth) is an accepted way scientists cause new scientific discoveries of a varied sort.
Similarly, when examining human behavior at the meso-level, at the time when astrophysicists were aiming for the moon they inadvertently discovered Teflon as an effective material to place on the front end of the space shuttle in order to deflect heat during re-entry through the earth's atmosphere and it worked. Well, all of that is fine and dandy; problem is, Teflon started showing up on all of our household pots and pans, hence, it began the demise of the *comal* and *sartén* (iron skillets) and a whole host of my favorite Mexican foods changed forever: chilaquiles, chorizo con huevos, refried beans, you name it, even toasted red and green chiles, didn’t taste the same, tasting more like rubber or something synthetic. How on earth can you make refried beans in a Teflon coated pan? It’s no wonder would be Chicano millennials don’t get the full Chicano experience.

It’s important to note that each of the big data Wikis (e.g., Wikipedia, Wikibooks, Wiktionary, Wikidata, Wikisources, Meta-Wiki, MediaWiki, Wikinews, etc.) has over 1 million cross-references to Chicanos, Chicanas, Chicano Movement, Chicano Manifesto, Chicanos and the United Farm Workers, Chicano Intellectuals, the Social Psychology of Chicanos, Yo Soy Joaquin, Chicanos in Everyday Life, the demise of Chicano guys, Love During the Time of the Chicano Movement, a day without Chicanos, etc., etc., etc. Hijole! There is a lot more data than we had at the height of the Chicano Movement, so who says the “Chicano Movement is dead!”

Au contraire, it is as a matter of digital fact, more alive than ever. Yes indeed! Knowledge is power! And with all of this knowledge being digitized, the statement “Chicano power!” takes on a whole new meaning, especially once we reorganize all of the entries into Google that have ever been made; the amount of data gathered that is specific to all things Chicano is more than one million times of that archived in all of the libraries in the United States.

In a world of such digitization how could it not get personal? Think about what the digital revolution means to Chicanos at the micro level. Let’s take the application of artificial intelligence (AI). The fact that Google is gathering massive amounts of data on all things Chicano is more telling than one would think. Say we were to take the big data presently being gathered by either Google or Facebook and create algorithms to cross-connect ideas surrounding things of specific interest to Chicanos. For example, we could start with the perennial question “What is a Chicano?” The result would be much different in the manner in which I am suggesting compared to present-day methods for querying Google with questions.

Moreover, in today’s mindset one would simply Google or Google Scholar specific terms, questions or ideas, but again that is not what I am suggesting. What I am suggesting is a thorough cross-referencing of all things relational to anything pertaining to Chicanos through smart-algorithms, not only with the ability to call-up data that is queried (as we currently do) but also to create relational-data closely tied to the query itself.

Using this strategy one could infer to Google that the Chicano Movement never happened and the response would appear separating varying degrees of understanding: deep, deeper, deepest—linking to all relational aspects of the query possible within the big data Google archive. Today, Google simply presents the data as it appears.

The new strategy would produce smart-responses predicated on levels of understanding of the Chicano Movement through, say, critical examination or from the
viewpoint of non-Chicanos or from the perspective of a 3rd grader and at the same time provide thorough analyses, as if it were a well-educated human being capable of original thought. Through well-designed algorithms, we could also ask a smarter Google “What if?” scenarios. For example, “What if:

- …the Chicano Movement had become a nation-wide movement?
  …we could learn how people from other countries interpret and perceive the Chicano Movement?
- …everyone in American society supported the Chicano Movement, what type of society would we have?
- …we knew the impact of the Cuban Revolution on the Chicano Movement, or vice versa?
- …the U.S. embargo were lifted and everyone in Cuba saw themselves as Chicanos?

Do you see the difference this new strategy would make in the Google inquiry? The new strategy would not only pull up all of the data you can presently pull up on Google, but it would also create a web-like effect and demonstrate how things like ideas, values, beliefs and more are related at an endless number of levels of predication. And in the same spirit in which we can even Google Google, we could inquire within Google the relational impact new algorithm designs had on the process of searching for the truth about Chicanismo. Hijole!

Conversely, many top computer scientists argue that Google driven applications, such as robots will never be able to control or out-think humans because they are not capable of original thought. My sense is that this may or may not be the case; in the meantime, artificial intelligence has a lot to offer the further development of the Chicano psyche. For instance, stone-cold Chicanos like to intellectualize about what a Chicano world would be like, much as we spent a couple of decades trying to figure out who we were and what we stood for.

This way, consider classic interactional behavior at weekly MEChA meetings. I’m still not sure what we were talking about except that we always seemed to want to out-Chicano one another, whatever that means?

Now let’s say we created a Chicano robot that was interactional, socially so. This would be the smartest Chicano-centered-Chicano we know. It would be like giving Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez a Ph.D. in physics, mathematics, psychology or Chicano Studies. Or, designing a robot made up of the ingenious minds of Corky, Reyes Tijerina, Luis Valdez, and Amalia Mesa-Baines. We could interact with this robot and come to learn more about our own Chicanismo than we could from interacting with most Chicanos, hence, we would come to see ourselves the way millions of other Chicanos would see us (through the big data held within the robot) and advance from there.
We could take Cesar Chavez's values and beliefs and build them into a robot as well, assign Cesar a Ph.D. in science and ask him to reflect on the national STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) movement. Imagine a world where one could have a sparkling interchange of ideas pertaining to all things Chicano with a smart Chicano robot; beats the hell out of talking about the Kardashians.

Okay, let me get a little more personal. Stop and think about every single social interaction you have in daily life. When you reflect in this way you come to see how many of these interactions are for the most part meaningless or, say, "surface level." Aristotle would argue that this is part of our human condition; that part of being human is navigating daily life in-and-around social interactions that have little meaning, like saying “Good morning” to a stranger and that this behavior is an integral part of how it is we socially construct our reality in daily life.

In today’s world, with the advent of social media (namely the iPhone), people in daily life are focused on their iPhones, conducting to a large extent meaningless (surface level) interactions while in public places and recognizing the presence of others before them far less, and for some this leads to subtle, yet real, forms of alienation. Conversely the Scottish moralist, David Hume, would argue that by our very nature human beings are social animals.

In other words notwithstanding the power of the iPhone, there is still a large segment of society that does not become alienated by virtue of social media, but rather, they become annoyed at what it does to people. I am not willing to go into a treatise about this contradiction at this time but do want to make the point that the impact of the iPhone (and all the meaningless social interactions it encourages) on the human psyche not only causes cognitive dissonance in the individual; it also changes the interactional fabric of American society.

Now, back to the idea of artificial intelligence. Once Google begins to allow individuals to design personal algorithms for their own purposes, like asking “What if?” scenarios or
causing new networks of Chicano stocks of knowledge to become relational in big data virtual spaces, we will be able to create the most interesting Chicano in the world; let’s call this Chicano, “Honesto Bravo.” Honesto is a robot that takes into account all things that have ever had any Chicano inference throughout all of time through Google and as a result is able to mimic the social interactions of real live Chicanos.

At the surface level, Honesto is able to respond to an endless number of meaningless interactions like saying, “Good morning,” to strangers, which, like millions of other meaningless interactions is a simple indexical expression, much like wit, which is a low form of intelligence that appears to be much grander that it is; wit is simply an indexical expression, a premeditated thought waiting to be pulled forward for use.

Honesto’s true ability however is revealed when we move far beyond indexical expressions and reach deeper levels of predication as evidenced by a sparkling interchange of intellectual ideas for hours at a time, never tiring, always challenging, and forever applying critical examination. Now that’s the type of Chicano we can look forward to in the future, not a real human, but one with such attributes that we come to prefer the social interactions of the robot over the boring human being who only wants to talk about the next new app on their iPhone.

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