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Karen Johnson: Living Life on the Edge (of the earth)

Introduction

Karen Susan Johnson is a 36 year old single mum from Blackpool, UK. She has two kids, Ashleigh and Steve Jr., and is widowed. Karen is an avid ‘flat earther’: she firmly believes the earth resembles a pancake and views NASA as her sole enemy. Most importantly: she has been extremely active on Facebook for the past month. However, much like her two children, Karen does not exist. Created to explore a flat-earth based filter bubble, her posts regarding topics ranging from minion memes to flat earth proof gained a remarkable amount of attention.

Before Karen’s overnight success as a flat earth influencer, her Facebook profile was rather quiet and empty - nobody seemed interested in being her friend in the beginning. With such a meagre social presence on the platform, her Facebook feed primarily consisted of news articles by The Sun and posts in the flat earth-related groups she joined. In the image below you can see all the sources of the post she interacted with and with which one she interacted the most with.



Image 2: A Selection of Karen Susan Johnson's liked pages.

“The Calm”: Karen’s embryonic popularity phase

In the interest of furthering Karen’s believability, we decided to add a fake photographer’s logo to Karen’s stock image profile picture - this made it seem as though she hired a family photographer to capture her love ones. Armed with her job title set to stay-at-home parent, Karen started attempting to make real connections. After joining several groups, mostly relating to flat earthism in some way, the fake profile attempted adding like-minded Facebook users. Sadly, despite her relatively high frequency of posting, few people accepted Karen’s requests. One week into her existence, she managed to ‘befriend’ roughly fifteen, rather inactive users. Although an expansive network of friends remained elusive, Karen’s flat earth-filter bubble was coming along quite clearly: her recommended groups and feed were filling up with relevant content for this obscure subculture..

Through the use of the Facebook Tracking Exposed tool to analyse Karen’s feed, we can draw a number of conclusions based on her activity. It becomes clear that text-based posts

and pictures were the primary source of her flat earth-related content (see image 2). However, it should be noted that there is an overlap between all categories and ‘groups’, seeing as many posts and images were posted within groups but not categorised as such. The category ‘groups’ solely indicates recommended groups displayed on Karen’s feed.

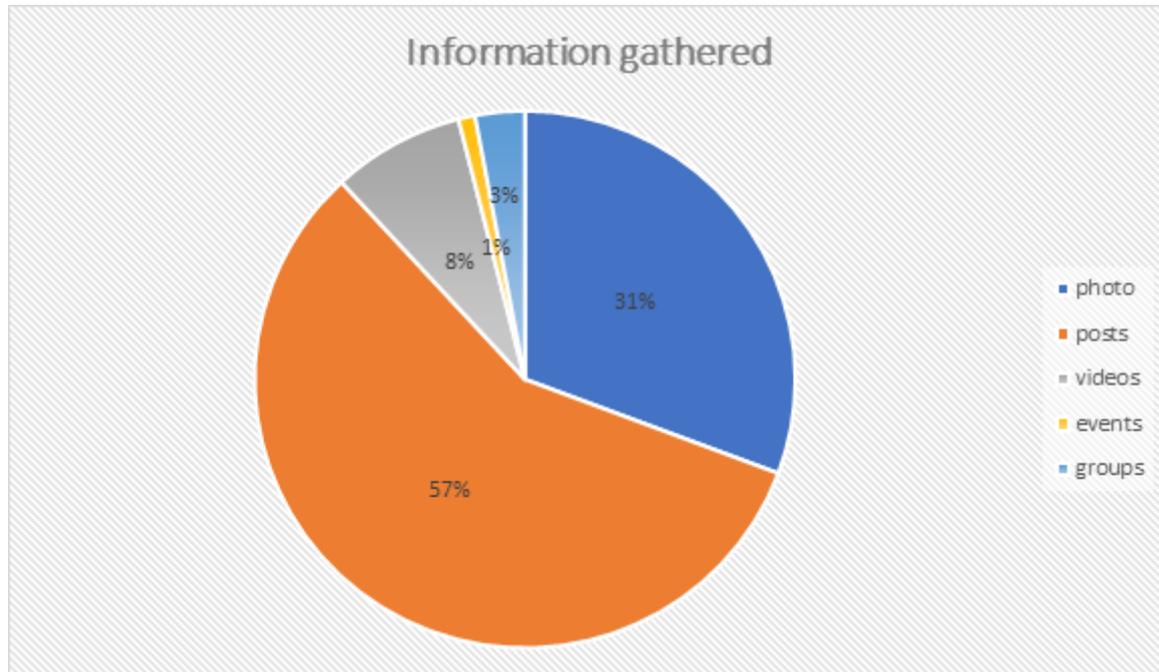


Image 3: types of content on Karen’s timeline, March 7 - March 13

Whilst it is hardly surprising that most of Karen’s feed consisted of text and images, her account displayed a severe lack of interest in events and videos. To counteract this, Karen has since decided to attend several events, all of which relating to her interests and being in or around her hometown of Blackpool. This was an effort to gain more diversity in the data we

could collect, in the hopes of discovering a lead for a journalistic data ‘story’.

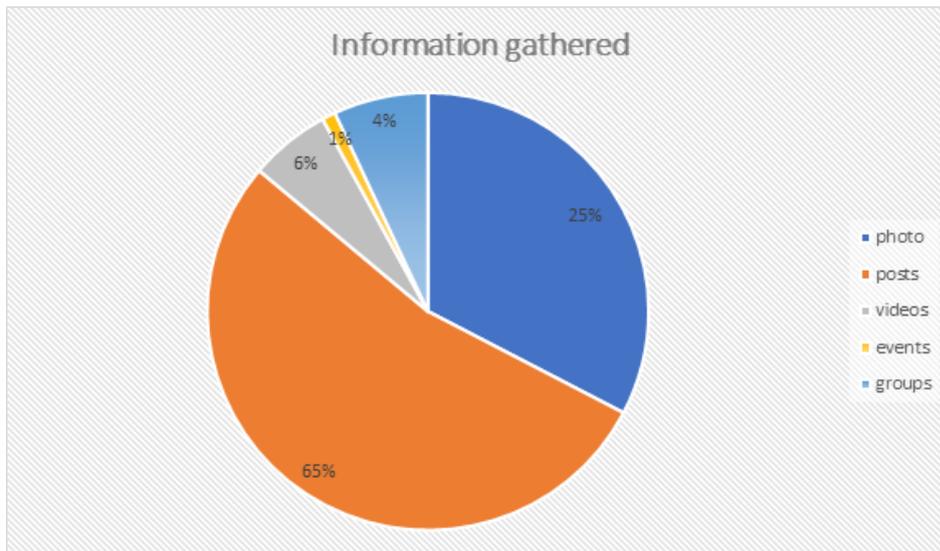


Image 4: types of content on Karen's timeline, March 14 - March 29

In the second pie chart, Image 4, we created a new graph after Karen's Facebook page gained more interest. This documented a few noticeable but not monumental changes: her interaction with posts increased, while her interaction with videos decreased. We decided to put these changes down to our lack of structure when operating her page, i.e. there was no quota for types of post that we decided to fill. Karen's overall activities on Facebook took rise as she became more comfortable sharing anything which struck her to be of remote interest, even utilising the 'questions' feature and thus developing a more rounded out personality on the online platform. This unbridled lease on data creation did not change the percentage of which she interacted with 'events' organisation.

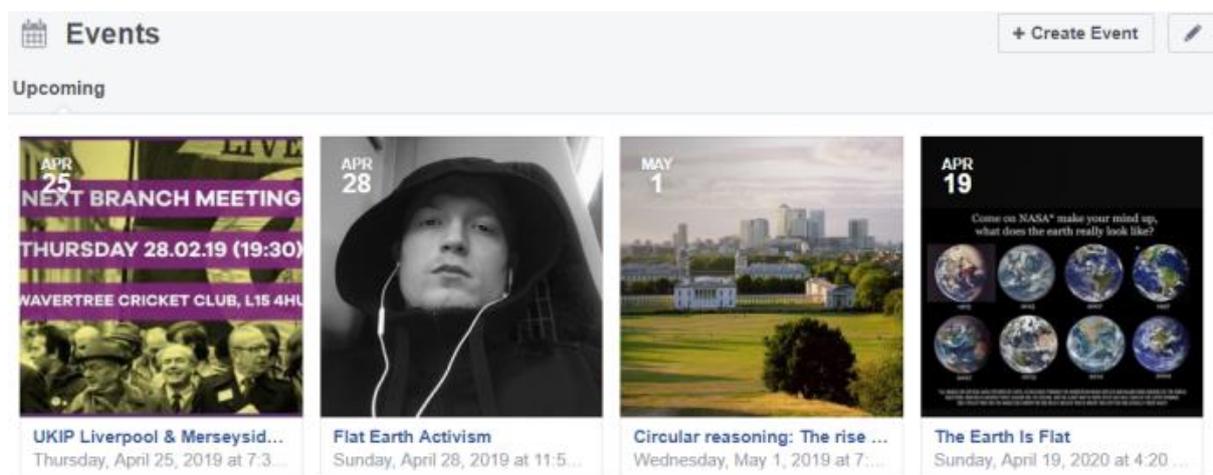


Image 5: Events Karen has indicated she will attend

Before Karen's profile took off, we tracked not only the types of posts she interacted with, but also the modes of interactions which took place. This included the likes, conversations, and comments which she exchanged with other users. Of these 'early' interactions, Karen communicated with more men than women. Sadly, due to her miniscule amount of friends, this data is not expansive enough to make any direct conclusions about gender related to the flat earth filter bubble. Karen also reached out to a number of 'single mum' groups, patrolling the members of these communities to make new friends.

"The Storm": Karen Becomes an Overnight Success

Thankfully, these attempts at making Karen Susan Johnson as believable as possible finally paid off. Upon logging in to do Karen's daily rounds of enthusiastic posting, sharing and liking on the single mum's profile, we noticed she had gathered hundreds of friend requests overnight. Her immense popularity has not slowed down since: Karen is receiving more friend requests than she can possibly keep up with. In order to calculate the exact amount of requests, the account was checked four times with intervals of roughly twelve hours. The amount of requests is the new friend requests gained during this time, not the accumulated total.

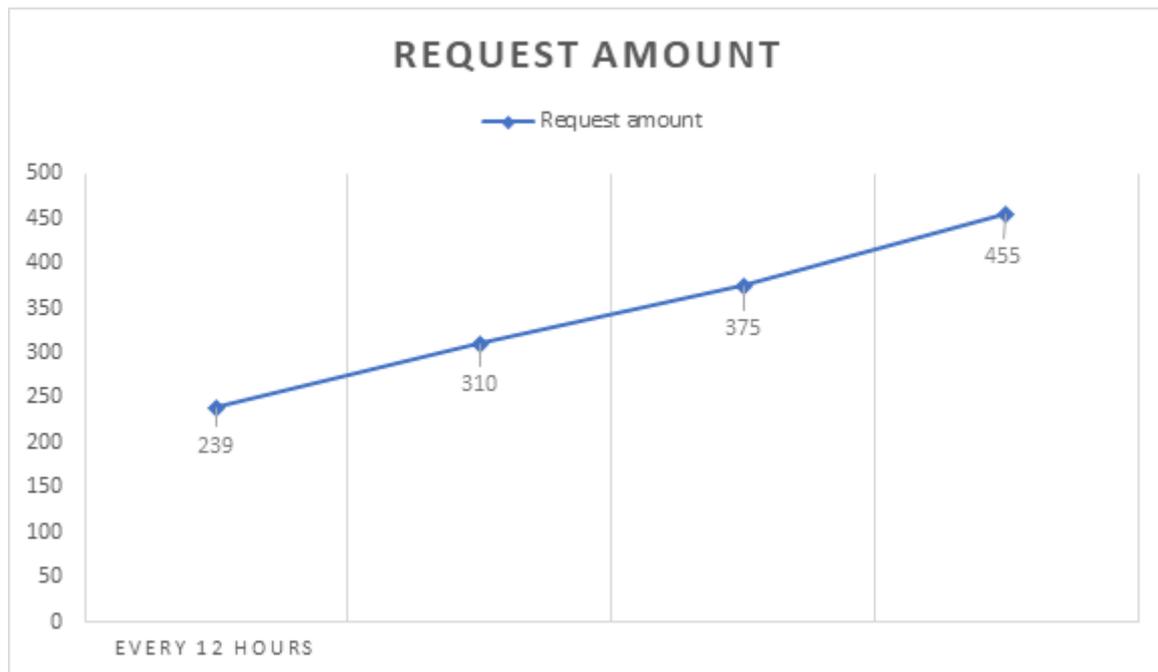


Image 6: Karen's popularity

Using these results as an average, it can be calculated that Karen Susan Johnson receives $(239+310+375+455)/(4 \times 12) = 29$ friend requests every hour, or one every two minutes. This exponential rate of friendship requests is clearly a remarkable byproduct of joining groups and feigning enthusiasm in relationships with strangers.

However, the reason behind this sudden 'explosion' was rather unclear. In order to figure out exactly how this rise in popularity had happened, Karen took matters into her own hands, and began to chat with some of her many friends. Directly asking her brand new buddies how they came across her profile, many answers were quite apologetic. While this may seem insignificant to the 'how' question, it is notable considering this could imply that these people add a large number of others, expecting to be told off for doing so and apologising in advance after learning from past experiences.

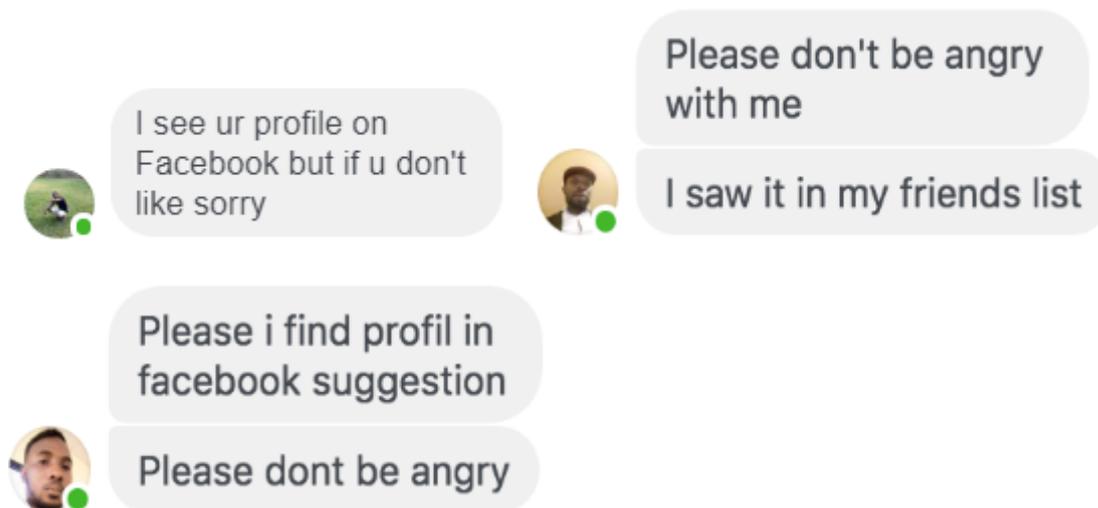


Image 7: Karen's friends apologising in advance

The most common answer to the question of how people found Karen's profile can, yet again, be traced back to Facebook's algorithm. With most responses indicating that Karen has become a popular pick for many user's 'recommended friends' section, it can also be said that the algorithm is favouring her profile. She has landed herself in some sort of a circuit amongst trigger-happy users who are looking for expansive friend networks online. Interestingly enough, a quick Google search will show that this is not uncommon: many active Facebook users with a low amount of friends will receive numerous requests.

Turning back to the flat earth filter bubble, seeing as Karen was chatting with multiple people, she asked her friends on their beliefs regarding earth's shape. Most of the responses indicated either a lack of knowledge or, indeed conviction regarding its flat nature. However, a small amount of non-flat earthers seemingly reached Karen's profile. Considering this is a strong minority, the flat earth filter bubble can still be seen as intact.

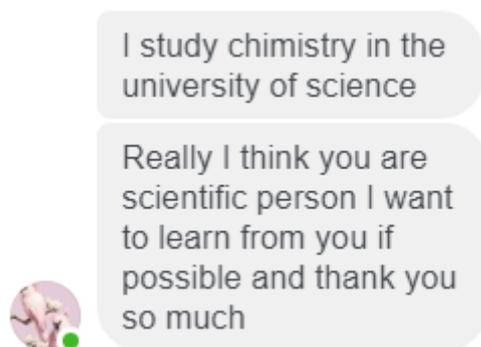


Image 8: An academic admirer

After Karen's unforeseen rise in popularity it was difficult to miss the fact that most of her current friends are male. By taking a sample of her total amount of friends (100 out of 1249), it is possible to estimate the gender division among her friends.

Women	23%
Men	77%

Table 1: Male-female proportion count of Karen's friends

Going by this sample of 100 from her total amount of friends would roughly betoken a ratio of 3:1, or that roughly 77% or more than three quarters are male. Clearly there are problems with assuming this sample, as it is only a representation of 12% of her total friends. Perhaps a limitation of only using the Facebook Tracker Exposed extension is that it does not allow deeper data collection beyond post interaction. Notwithstanding, the rather considerable discrepancy of gender bodes well for the credibility of this method.

One of Karen Susan Johnson's friends is called Lucie Dvorak. Hailing from the Czech Republic and currently residing in the Netherlands, Lucie is an avid anti-vaxxer. She firmly believes in a flat earth, much like Karen. On top of that, much like Karen, Lucie is not real either. A fake account created as the focus of a similar project conducted by students, Lucie enjoyed the same fate as Karen. Her account amassed a large amount of friends as well, currently sitting at over 400 connections. This is rather interesting, seeing as her filter bubble shares similarities with Karen's and has become quite popular as well. If time would permit us to expound on our project, an interesting research question may focus around Facebook's role in the proliferation of flat earthers.

Critical reflection

To reflect critically on the data journalism project and how data was gathered from our fake Facebook account, we must first look at the tool we were ordered to use for it. Facebook

Tracking Extension is a beta software tool created by developers Claudio Agosti and Giovanni Civardi. The software has been around since 2017 and is still a work-in-progress. Its main goals revolve around the ability to look deeper at data one can gather on the algorithmic personalizations of Facebook, the insulated filter bubbles that fester online, and also on the verification of the claim that Facebook in fact enables the existence of these filter bubbles due to its algorithms.

Since it is still in a beta-phase, the developers have some way to go before achieving their goals. The user-friendliness aspect leaves room for improvement. It is sometimes difficult to tell which information is being tracked and which is not. It would be easier if the tool only highlighted the information it tracked and leaving the un-tracked information blank. One concept that would be an enhancement for the final version of the software would be the possibility to get the tracked data directly to an excel file which would remove the step of having to convert the data. However, in its current state the tool is relatively easy to master and makes data gathering from Facebook easy and it gives a good overview over what Facebook sees.

Gathering data for our fake profile was a challenge in itself. For the first week, the profile did not generate much traffic and it was difficult to find any relevant data to the focal point flat-earthers due to fbtrex not gathering data from Facebook-groups. After Karen's popularity blew up the information got easier to access due to more friends sharing posts outside of groups and information shared directly with Karen. Thanks to this, the filter bubble of flat-earthers got a clearer view and a pattern could be seen. Seeing what kind of friends Karen attracted, how they found her and how they interact with the different status updates she has made also gave a clear indication of the flat earthism filter bubble.

The length of the project is perhaps one of the bigger issues when it comes to the data gathering. Karen's profile has been live since the beginning of March which means the total amount of data gathered is for roughly a month. To make a precise conclusion on the filter bubbles is hard with such little time to gather the data, and so it would have been interesting to see if and how the data would change if we were given more time to explore and nurture the fake profile. Since none of us are trained in data journalism, it would also have been helpful to have a trained-eye to help with deciphering the data and perhaps notice patterns that we may have missed.

Data journalism in itself is a good way to get a deeper understanding of certain statistics as well as to inject numbers with a narrative, but we have encountered some ethical issues with it in regards to this project. For a start, in the beginning of the project we tracked

the fake profile in combination to our own meaning that fbtrex was used to track our personal accounts. Even though it is common knowledge that Facebook is tracking your account, it felt like a breach of privacy to allow a third-party company to get access to the information even after reading on their website how they handle and anonymize it. To create the fake profile was also a challenge due to Facebook's account verification needing a phone number to work and none of us felt particularly comfortable allowing Facebook to use our personal phone number

The account itself is also subject to some ethical problems. After Karen's popularity blew up and she started getting more personal messages from strangers it does seem important to tell the people we have interacted with that Karen is not a real person. The concept of catfishing comes to mind, and we do realize how easy it would be to take advantage of some of the people that message Karen on a daily basis. Additionally, we can see the names and accounts of the unknowing subjects of this study. Most of Karen's subjects are unaware that they are part of a study, which does seem to breach good research ethics. This makes it a confusing element for a project which appears to concern itself with online moral conduct.

There is likely other ways that the data could have been handled and worked with, but for the story of flat earthism and considering the limited time there was to create, nurture and expand the fake account, the data gathered and its conclusions are in accordance with what was assigned. That being said there is no question that the structure of the assignment was often a bit vague and felt as though it was not well thought out through particular stages. Leaving students to fabricate a journalistic narrative with clusters of data and graph-generating software proved to be slightly reductive as a group project of this scale.

An interesting and natural continuum of the story is to see how flat earthism will hold up if placed in the same concept as the Blue Feed/Red Feed article from The Wall Street Journal. By looking into the data from the different flat earth groups that Karen has joined and gather the articles shared, we argue that a similar concept could be achievable. The data used in this could help see to what extent the conspiracy theory is heading and get a better number of how fast it is spreading.

Conclusion

In the end, this data journalism project that has revolved around Karen Johnson's fake online life on Facebook has evolved into a interesting and surprising project. Karen Susan Johnson is a polar opposite person in comparison with each of us, and to create her online life and make

this as plausible and as close to reality as possible was fun, though sometimes challenging. When we tried to generate vast amounts of data in the beginning we realised Karen needed to have larger presence, and her burgeoning success ensured she became very popular and gained hundreds of friends. This then led to a more prolific production of data as well as odd messages from male facebook users to keep track of. The Fbtrex tool helped in the tracking and sorting of the data, though it would have been interesting if this extension had allowed us to discover more about Karen's fascinating flat-earth-orientated, data. Though evolving Karen's profile was a fun process , making and posting memes, expressing Karen's direct and original thoughts, there was a constant awareness to keep the ethical implications in mind. As part of the assignment is essentially creating a fake profile, there is only a small dividing line between that and the practice of deception. The goal is not to catfish Karen's staggering number of 1.247 Facebook friends, so an ethical solutions will be found for that. Karen Susan Johnson's life on Facebook will therefore not be forever, but she did make a striking and thought-provoking impression.

Footnote (who did what)

Jessie: responsible for the introduction and concluding of the report

Jesper: had the role of reporting the development and tracking of Karen's profile

Heaverly: created and recounted the infographics used

Johanna: took control of the critical reflection

Stella: in charge of editing and use of cohesive language and consistency.