Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week's guest is Lev Manovich, Professor of Computer Science at the graduate center, and one of the leading scholars in the world today in the field of digital culture. Professor Manovich, a pioneer in the field of cultural analytics, is the director of the Cultural Analytics Lab that uses science to analyze patterns in big cultural data.

Tanya Domi: Professor Manovich, welcome to the Thought Project.

Lev Manovich: Thank you so much. I love your project name. I can come back any time.

Tanya Domi: Terrific. Today we're gonna talk about your new study on Twitter and can you tell us why did you choose Twitter as a platform for studying trends in new media.

Lev Manovich: Since 2007, 10 years ago, we started a lab, which we later called “Cultural Analytics,” and the idea was to take advantage of over billions of images and posts people share on social media. First of all, to understand what do we share, the content when we cast images, the styles, the colors, what the people photograph, and also to learn about the world through social media. So we started doing a series of projects. And each project was bigger than before.

Lev Manovich: So in 2013, we first did a project called “Photo trials.” We looked at 2.3 million images, shared in 13 global cities, debuted the project on Broadway, where we collected every Instagram image shared in Manhattan over five months. And then 2014, Twitter had a call for a grant because we wanted to see if researchers can use real data in different ways. So 1300 labs around the world have applied. And first I thought, we have no chance. And when the researcher in my lab said, “Lev, let’s apply. I have an idea.” So we took exactly two hours, wrote a grant application, and to my total surprise, Twitter announced that out of 1300 labs, only six were awarded the grant. It was only two from the States. It was us and Harvard Medical School.

Tanya Domi: That’s amazing. I mean, can you tell us what your results has told you? What is it telling you?

Lev Manovich: So after we got the grant, Twitter said, "Okay, we can't give you money but we'll give you any data you want." And I said, "I want to get every image which was shared on your platform publication after edit with image sharing feature". So we got two-hundred seventy million images shared worldwide from August 2011 until July 2014 and we looked at the images relation to the economy of the countries where we shared. So what we found out when sharing capacity was
[inaudible 00:00:31], people start sharing images in places you would expect. In London, in Paris, and Tokyo, but three years later, the cities in most images were also Manila, and outer cities in developing countries. What we also found was that after a while, people started sharing images in other developing countries and this image sharing grows much more quicker in the more poor countries. So paradoxically the more poor a country was, the faster this sharing activity was growing. We also found a very strong relation with the immediate age of people in a particular country, so the younger a population is, more images of people sharing but then there's a big question.

Lev Manovich: So at the end of our study period 2014, we still see a big gap within the sharing activity in let's say countries with high or medium income versus low income. So there's a gap right? There's a gap in how people use social media, what gets presented on Twitter that the picture world will see, so we said, can we predict can we estimate, will this gap ever be breaked? So extrapolated with trends up to 2021, and we found something very troubling. So what we found was by 2021, even the same pattern will continue between sharing in cities in the countries which are very developed, medium developed, and middle-income is the same, but the gap between them and low-income countries remains. So if this trend were to continue, of course we don't know if it will, it will maybe take hundred years to bridge this gap. That's a very interesting, troubling finding, about the digital divide, and about our world.

Tanya Domi: What does your study say though about the implications of this youth propelled growth? In other words, the younger the population, the faster they're sharing in lower-developed countries, what does that tell you?

Lev Manovich: Well, so what I think are a couple of things. We have a new generation of people, who today are anywhere from twelve to twenty-five year old, and I travel a lot, right, I just came from Seoul, and before that I was in Moscow, and I was in two cities in Siberia, so I sample right, a world by travel, and with this new generation, I think it's the first truly global generation, that connected on this global platform, we all speak very good English, we have friends in other countries, and it's not only with we can share more images, we are sharing our images because it is part of our world view.

Lev Manovich: So I feel the world has really changed, and my feeling is it changed around 2012, because when I go to Moscow, and I see amazing, experimental food scene, I say when did we start this, they say 2012. When I go to Korea, I said you have this amazing, beautiful, twenty-thousand coffee shops, and you have these new parks, like a high-line in New York, accessible to everybody, and so you have this sophisticated architecture, open spaces, food, and so on, I say when did it start, we say 2012. So there is something about 2012 where I think the world became connected enough and you have a new generation of people who have chip phones, and laptops, and a very [inaudible 00:07:15] recordings of life, around the world, up to high level.
Lev Manovich: So it's not only people are sharing more images, I think we learn what other people do, and I think we are bringing it back to our communities.

Tanya Domi: It's interesting that you highlight, and earmark, 2012. That's an interesting finding and yet at the same time that there's this unprecedented connection, it seems that from your map of a hundred cities that you've looked at, that Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and the Americas are the real hot-spots for social image sharing. Is that right? Is that correct that I'm making that kind of conclusion?

Lev Manovich: I think that is correct but it also depends of course what you measure, how you measure. So we have like our highlighted cities, but [inaudible 00:08:08] the cities we chose, but usually when people report about urban trends and global trends, we said, let's look at all the capitals.

Lev Manovich: So let's look at more developed cities, and we wanted to create a much more idiosyncratic, much more diverse set, but of course beside the result, which is maybe, if we chose other cities we would say other things, but in general, what we found is this, right: So an image sharing takes off, let's say it does take off first, in the most developed cities, alright, so Paris, and London, and New York, and London, Tokyo, but if you looking at the growth, after awhile, there is no growth in Europe. There is some growth in America, and the fastest growth is in Africa, but in Africa the amount of people who share is still very small. So in a way, probably, both in terms of number images being shared, in that kind of growth rate, probably Asia, not only Southeast Asia, but also other parts of Asia is probably a dominant force, which I think is not surprising.

Tanya Domi: That's fascinating. What do you think, we're now in this new social media age, social media 2.0, Instagram, and Twitter, what do you think that as we look forward, what are the implications of this historically do you think? We're in this new world, can you conjecture from your study what potential implications there are?

Lev Manovich: So today, people often say "oh, we are oversharing" or people say "risk too much information, we get lost". I actually think we are very much in the beginning of this period, think about where civilization was in 1830, or railroads in 1870, this new world, of all this connectivity, and social media is less than fifteen years old, so one thing we found in our study, is if you look outside of few big capitals, the sharing of global communication only takes off about 2012, 2013. So it's only been four or five years old.

Lev Manovich: So what I want to say is I don't know exactly what the future will be, it will be new, it will be different, and we haven't seen anything yet. We just very much at the beginning.

Tanya Domi: In conjunction with this study, you happened to publish a new book. Tell us about this book, it's titled "Instagram: A Contemporary Image", and discuss, share
with us, the methodology behind it. You've published this online, which you have done throughout your career, from the very beginning, even before you came to America, you were posting research online, is that right?

Lev Manovich: I got my PhD in '93, that's when I got my first academic job. '93 was a very important year because this is when the first graphic browser, a browser which allowed you to navigate the web, as a visual medium, came out. It was called Mosaic. So I saw that, and I said well, why don't I create a website, and start putting my articles online, and the reason I did this, was in fact because of my immigrant, more global background, because I realized that if I only publish articles or books in academic journals, it's inaccessible to most people, even most professors in other countries. Even in Europe, to buy books from Cambridge University Press is very expensive. We're not talking about [inaudible 00:11:46], we're not talking about some city in Central Asia, so I'm probably [inaudible 00:11:53] academic, who made pretty big career, I guess since you are talking to me, I guess it means that.

Lev Manovich: For internet, so since '93, everything I write, I would post online, and then when it came to this book, I said, I'm writing about something which is changing, the Instagram medium is changing, so if I write it and when I have it published and [inaudible 00:12:15] press, it will be [inaudible 00:12:17] for your gap, and I kind of want to capture what I'm seeing, but I also want people to read it, to discuss with me, to argue with me, so I started writing this in December of 2015, and every few months I'll finish a chapter, and post it online. So the book is both analysis of Instagram culture and the kind of lifestyle and sensibility with new global generation. It's also, it's almost a chronicle of a medium which was changing as I was watching it.

Tanya Domi: That's fascinating. What did the results of your research, what did it show you?

Lev Manovich: So the book, is based both on my own use of Instagram, a photo, couple hundred of accounts, I a few thousand followers, my travel, and its also based on the work in the lab, where we have used digitalization tools to look at sixty-million Instagram photos, shared in seventeen global cities, over four years. What we found, is with Instagram, it's not at all what people think we are. People think Instagram is mostly beautiful images, selfies, celebrities, food, fashion, and this things exist, but its a very very tiny percentage.

Lev Manovich: So what we found is mostly people use Instagram a way people used imager, snapshot photography, in twentieth century, so it's mostly normal people, sharing everyday, almost random pictures of our lives, random beautiful pictures, [inaudible 00:13:50] Photoshop, in fact, this beautiful, glamorous Instagram, which media writes about, it's a very very tiny percentage. So Instagram is really about everyday, and what you see, what you see on Instagram is not what it is.

Tanya Domi: Lev, thank you very much for being with us today.
Lev Manovich: You're very welcome and thank you for having me, and most of all, thank you for having such a wonderful name for your program.

Tanya Domi: The thought project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production, engineering, and technical assistance, by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.