The Internet of (stolen) things: MIT researchers get unexpected insights into implications of new tracking technologies

Video to be shown at CES convention in Las Vegas on Wednesday, January 11

During the summer of 2011, researchers at the MIT Senseable City Lab undertook a project (backtalk) to study the fate of used and discarded electronic refuse. As part of the project, the MIT team developed two different types of self-reporting technologies to track on obsolete electronics as they travelled across the world for recycle or reuse.

Real time data from the project was displayed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, as part of the recent “Talk to Me” exhibition on communications between people and things. It shed light on what becomes of the large volumes of electronic refuse that are generated annually, and on the “second life” of used computers that are adopted by new owners.

Following BackTalk’s deployment last summer, one of the machines used by project researchers to record images was stolen from the lab’s MIT headquarters. Researchers were able to recover the machine, utilizing the new tracking technologies developed for the project.

A video documenting the saga of the missing laptop, and how it was recovered, will be shown at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas this week (details below). The video is viewable here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fHZYyOZU4c

"This follow up (literally!) to the MoMA project was completely unexpected,” said Carlo Ratti, director of the Senseable City Lab. “It shows us what might happen in a utopian/dystopian “Internet-of-things” world, when every object on our planet will be addressable and trackable, as scholars have been predicting for many years.”

“The large volume of electronic refuse currently being produced around the globe presents both a toxic liability and a potentially valuable resource,” said Assaf Biderman, associate director of the Lab. “One of the consequences of digitizing our everyday objects is that the data they capture provides us with new information about the impact of our actions – from what we consume to the waste we discard, and to the things we give away.”

The Back-Talk team at the Senseable City Lab includes Carlo Ratti, Assaf Biderman, Dietmar Offenhuber, David Lee, Jennifer Dunnam, Paolo Patelli, Aaron Siegel, E Roon Kang, Francesco Pilla, and Douglas Albert. The BackTalk project was part of a collaboration with Qualcomm Incorporated and LG Electronics who helped make the global tracking technology successful. Outreach partners included World Computer Exchange, the Peace Corps, World Teach, https://github.com/prey.

High-resolution images and videos available at: http://senseable.mit.edu/moma-followup. For additional information please contact senseable-press@mit.edu