

Additional Documentation regarding « Mr President, You've Got Mail » an on line group happening part of the Ahmad Sherif Project

I - Background

In March 2007, the fictitious character « Ahmad Sherif » had already been working in all directions, producing, videos, songs, writings and all forms of media displayed all over the Internet, all interconnected but never entirely centralized in one single spot. Their dissemination on the Web and other environments gave to the project enough momentum to attempt a group happening.

« President Mubarak, you've got mail » a group happening with « Google Ads »

Google Ads are commercials that appear on the right hand of Google results, whenever you perform a search that could link to a commercial product.

To be able to have your commercials appear, you need to open an account with Google and to reserve keywords. For example, you would reserve the keyword « milk », if your company produced milk, or yoghurt.

The way this worked appeared as a perfect and highly visible way to communicate with the President to voice free opinions on a variety of topics.

« Ahmad Sherif » opened an account with Google and reserved a very large amount of specific keywords relating to Egypt.

Any search for one of these words, in 49 countries, displayed one of Ahmad Sherif's personal messages to the President.

When Ahmad Sherif would activate his messages, they would be displayed hundreds of thousands of times in a few minutes, all around the world.

It's as though Google had been transformed into the President's mailbox. A mailbox everyone could see.

As opposed to Ads (that companies want you to click-on), these messages did not want to be clicked on. The message they displayed **was** the « product ». Being displayed and simply read, was their final destination. But Google imposes that you provide two links. This is how they earn their income: when people click, Google earns a few cents or more — that « Ahmad Sherif » would have to pay for.

These « imposed links » could easily become a financial barrier to the project, but could also turn these written messages into multimedia messages.

Coming around the financial barrier

The keywords system works like an auction, with expensive and cheap keywords. Everybody wants to buy the word «Book» or «CD», but no one wants to buy «Hosni Mubarak» or other specific keywords relating to Egypt. The keywords chosen by Ahmad Sherif weren't wanted by anyone (0.04 cents per click or less), because they were « uncommercial », they only concerned extremely specific Egyptian topics.

The happenings occurred every Thursday, for an hour only, from 3 to 4 pm. To keep things reasonable, Ahmad Sherif never exceeded 10 countries. Over an hour, his messages would be displayed about

10,000 times and would generate about 1000 clicks. On the financial end, each happening cost about 30 to 40 euros (which could be compared to the price of a professional digital print).

Then it became a group happening

Considering the maturity of the project it seemed possible to invite people to participate in a group happening. They would simply need to write a message to the President, and send it to « Ahmad Sherif » who would edit it and « feed-it » in a Google Ad.

Ahmad Sherif released a humorous video explaining how the happenings would work. The arabic title of the happening was « Thursday's conversations with the President ».

The reactions were immediate. People wrote their messages in comments, on blogs and especially in private emails. Some would write endless letters or just a few lines, or words.

In Google, the messages started appearing. One could see pseudonyms talking to their President in several languages, in different tonalities (emotion, grudge, humour, satire, testimonial), using sometimes SMS abbreviations to keep things short.

What the messages linked to

The messages would link to Ahmad Sherif's, videos, songs, animations, writings, or visual works that would be in relation with what the messages were expressing.

Why the happenings stopped

The happenings went on for several months, getting attention from the people, the local press (Al Masry al Youm, opposition tabloid), specialized observers such as Howard Rheingold (MIT/Smartmobs.com), local and foreign blogospheres.

During one of the happenings, Ahmad Sherif realized that some of the keywords he had chosen were labeled by Google's interface as « inactive », for example : « Hosni Mubarak » or « Al-Ahram » (government owned newspaper). Other sensitive keywords were also « inactive ». That was because these keywords had been acquired at a higher price by someone else. That was unusual.

Ahmad Sherif raised his biddings to 10 cts per keyword, instead of 0.04 cts. The ads were active again for a few minutes. A few minutes later, the value of these keywords had been raised again to 1 euro. The bidding went on and on, each time the interface would refresh, till the price of the « Hosni Mubarak » keyword reached 8 euros.

That meant that searching the keyword « Hosni Mubarak » and clicking on a message would cost the happening 8 euros/per click... The happening had to stop immediately.

One shouldn't jump to conclusions, but one could reasonably imagine that the person/entity bidding against Ahmad Sherif was probably the Egyptian government.