Interfaces and Consent

The aim of this workshop is for you to engage and reflect upon the relationship between interfaces and consent, particularly in situations where people are unsure how their data might be used by organizations and algorithms. Like last week's engagement with "Professor Bot," we'll ground this exercise in a scenario. You'll need a computer or paper + pen/pencil to take notes.

The "Smart" Library

It's the near-future again. You wrote your entrance essay for the English and New Media BA, and Professor Bot said, "Yaaaasss! You paaaaassss!" Congratulations. Your future is bright.

One week into the BA program, you're contacted by the university library. They ask you to participate in a pilot program about . . . you guessed it . . . more AI on campus. (In a shocking turn of events, this AI is also built by Big Four Tech Services, Inc.) You learn that all students in first-year English and New Media courses are encouraged to use the library's new AI Research Centre (AIRC) to conduct their work and write their essays. Before they begin, they must not only sign up for AIRC but also complete an online survey about their research habits and preferences. You are, of course, concerned about the extent to which B4TS is involved in this entire process, and you don't know how their algorithms and software actually work, let alone how they're being deployed by AIRC. Right now, you're just trying to determine how helpful AIRC might be for you as a student, and how much data you're willing to share with both them and, you assume, B4TS.

Step 1: You Form Groups of Three

Please form groups of three and determine your roles (one person per role): “designer for AIRC,” “interface for AIRC,” and “student.” As the designer for AIRC, your goal will be to gather *with consent* useful information from students. As an interface for AIRC, your goal will be to communicate effectively with students on behalf of AIRC. And as a university student, your goal will be to determine the degree to which you'll participate *with consent* in AIRC.

Step 2: The Designer Picks Two Categories

The AIRC designer in your group needs to decide how to focus their information gathering. What do the library and the AI need to know about students? What kind of data does AIRC need? The designer should begin this research by picking what they consider to be *the two most important categories* from this list of six: 1) Student History, 2) Student Preferences, 3) Student's Field of Study, 4) Student's Relationships, 5) Student Use of Services, and 6) Aggregate Data about Student Behaviours. They should not share which two categories of the six they selected.

Step 3: The Designer Lists Requests

Once the AIRC designer selects their categories, they will be given three requests per category, for a total of six requests. These requests ask the student for data. The designer should review these six requests without sharing them. Then they should write *one of their own requests*, one which corresponds with either one or both of the categories at hand. Once the designer has seven requests (six of which were pre-written) in hand, they should give those requests to the interface without sharing the requests with the student.

Step 4: The Interface Questions the Students

The interface begins requesting data from the student. They should first read aloud the following two sentences:

"As a first-year English and New Media student, you are encouraged to use the library's new AI Research Centre (AIRC) to conduct your work and write your essays. Before you begin at AIRC, we would like to learn more about your studies, study habits, and preferences."

Now the interface should read aloud their seven requests. The student should respond in turn and aloud to each request using one of the following answers:

a) I *would* provide AIRC that data.
b) I *might* provide AIRC with that data.
c) I *would not* provide AIRC with that data.

Following each of their responses, the student should briefly explain to the interface why they would, might, or would not provide AIRC with that data.

The interface should record the student's answers (a, b, or c) and their brief explanations.

The designer should observe the interaction between the interface and student and take notes along the way. However, they should *not* intervene in the process in any way.

Step 5: Switch and Repeat

Please switch roles and repeat Steps 2-4, with one important caveat: the new designer cannot select one of the two previously selected categories. They must choose from the other four categories provided.

Step 6: Reflect

Your group of three should now have 14 answers to 14 requests, plus some notes about the process. Please reflect on it all. To which requests would students *not* respond, and why? Which requests generated uncertainty ("might"), and why? What concerns emerged along the way? How did the presence of an interface mediate the relationship between AIRC, the designer, and the student? How did the presence of an interface affect your understanding of consent in this situation? How would the experience change if your human interface were a GUI or just an online form? What's the difference between express consent to provide data and understanding how that data will be used by others?

Step 7: Write

In your log, please use 100-150 words to share your experiences performing two different roles in this workshop. What did you learn about consent, interfaces, and data privacy? Then please communicate *one* important issue you believe designers (such as the AIRC designer) should consider when developing technologies (such as AI) with people's consent in mind. Think, for instance, about licensing agreements that are never read. Is there a way to make such "contractual" processes more meaningful, or to clarify their implications for users? How do you provide a service while also protecting privacy and mitigating risks? To which services should people opt *in* (instead of opting *out*), when, and why? How are the social and cultural consequences of systems made of code and algorithms communicated to people who aren't familiar with the technical dimensions of those systems? How *should* those consequences be communicated?

Questions

Student History

1. We would like data stating how long you have been a student here.
2. We would like data stating the days of the week you visit the library.
3. We would like data stating the titles of the last three books you read, the last three websites you visited, and the last three shows or films you watched.

Student Preferences

1. We would like data stating three specific tasks you want our research AI to perform for you.
2. We would like data identifying whether you would place our research AI in your residence and, if so, how frequently you would use it.
3. We would like data identifying whether you would give our research AI access to your course outlines, tests, writing, or notes and, if so, to which of them you'd provide access.

Student's Field of Study

1. We would like data identifying which of the following terms best describes the purposes of your research: personal, social, cultural, political, creative, theoretical, engineering, or scientific.
2. We would like data on the classes you're taking this academic year and when you study for them.
3. We would like data stating the three most important tasks research AI perform regularly in your discipline or field of study.

Student's Relationships

1. We would like data identifying whether your research involves human participants, human biological materials, big data, and/or archival materials.
2. We would like data stating whether any of your family members and friends also use or plan to use our research AI and, if so, their names.
3. We would like data stating whether you're willing to share your notes and research with peers and faculty in your program and, if so, their names.

Student Use of Services

1. We would like data stating which three library services are most important to you.
2. We would like data stating the web-based services to which you currently subscribe and for which you pay regular subscription fees.
3. We would like data stating whether you'll provide our research AI with access to your web-based service usage (including all Big Four Tech Services) and, if so, to which services you'll provide access.

Aggregate Data about Student Behaviours

1. We would like data indicating whether you will give our research AI permission to track your usage of it in order to optimize that usage and your research.
2. We would like data indicating whether you will give our research AI permission to track your usage of it in order to recommended personalized consumer products and share relevant job opportunities.
3. We would like data indicating whether you will give our research AI permission to graph and visualize your usage of it and to share those visualizations with peers and faculty in your program.