

INFO 200 Reflection Paper: Hot Air & High Fives

User-Centered Design: Who are the users?

Prior to taking INFO 200, I had been printing articles on some seemingly dubious practices in the technology industry and keeping them in a large black binder. Around 2014 and the release of the Snowden revelations I became paranoid of backdoors,¹ personal data-mining,² the power of scientific social engineering and marketing,³ ⁴ Comcast,⁵ tethering,⁶ the psychological tradeoffs of spending one's life in front of a screen,⁷ and government surveillance.⁸

⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ To me, it had appeared that the horribly anarchic digital playground of my childhood was

¹ Gallagher, Ryan, and Greenwald, Glenn. (12 March 2014). How the NSA plans to infect “millions” of computers with malware. *The Intercept*. Retrieved from <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/03/12/nsa-plans-infect-millions-computers-malware/>.

² Schmidt, Michael. (20 July 2014). Racy photos were often shared at NSA, Snowden says. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/21/us/politics/edward-snowden-at-nsa-sexually-explicit-photos-often-shared.html>.

³ Greenwald, Glenn. (24 February 2014). How covert agents infiltrate the internet to manipulate, deceive, and destroy reputations. *The Intercept*. Retrieved from <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/02/24/jtrig-manipulation/>.

⁴ Greenwald, Glenn. (14 July 2014). Hacking online polls and other ways British spies seek to control the internet. *The Intercept*. Retrieved from <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/07/14/manipulating-online-polls-ways-british-spies-seek-control-internet/>.

⁵ Hiltzik, Michael. (14 January 2014). Net neutrality is dead. Bow to Comcast and Verizon, your overlords. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/14/business/la-fi-mh-net-neutrality-20140114>.

⁶ Honan, Mat. (6 August 2012). How Apple and Amazon security flaws led to my epic hacking. *Wired*. Retrieved from <http://www.wired.com/2012/08/apple-amazon-mat-honan-hacking/all/>.

⁷ Carr, Nicholas. (2011). *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*. New York City: W.W. Norton & Company.

⁸ Lee, Timothy. (21 August 2014). White House cybersecurity czar brags about his lack of technical expertise. *Vox*. Retrieved from <http://www.vox.com/2014/8/21/6053819/white-house-cybersecurity-czar-brags-about-his-lack-of-technical>.

⁹ (8 August 2014). NSA tried to delete court transcript in lawsuit over deleting evidence. *Yahoo! News*. Retrieved from <http://news.yahoo.com/nsa-tried-delete-court-transcript-lawsuit-over-deleting-162014074.html>.

¹⁰ (14 November 2014). US government planes mimic cellphone towers to collect user data - report. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/14/government-planes-mimic-cellphone-towers-to-collect-user-data-report>.

¹¹ Berkes, Howard. (23 September 2013). Booting up: New NSA data farm takes root in Utah. *NPR*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/09/23/225381596/booting-up-new-nsa-data-farm-takes-root-in-utah>.

congealing into an insurmountable black box of omniscient technological deities endowed with the forces of big data. I began substantially cutting back on my digital footprint, wiped all of my social media, and tried my best to become some kind of ghost. I ended up with less web presence than both of my middle-aged parents and my little sister. At some point, I figuratively threw up my hands, thinking, “Man, this technology sucks, and I can’t click a thing without feeling marginally exploited. *Doesn’t anybody give a damn about the users anymore?* I feel Google’s colorfully corrosive and rancid breath down my spine at every turn. I can’t escape.”

Then I took INFO 200, learned about Batya Friedman’s Value-Sensitive Design theory,¹² and was relieved to find that people contemplate the values of users sometimes. I was a little incredulous that VSD was even a concept. I took this class, and I’m aiming for Informatics, and I’m studying programming, all so that I can have some say and participatory presence in the direction of technology and information science. I want to be able to make software and systems that respect the users and aren’t harmful at the very least, and is helpful and enriching at the very best. Essentially, I was looking for some perspective similar to VSD. Then again, who are the users? Are the users shareholders and programmers, or are the users consumers? These two camps often have conflicting values and desires at odds with each other.

¹² Friedman, Batya, and Hendry, David. (2009). *Value Sensitive Design*. Information School and Department of Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington. Retrieved from <http://vsdesign.org/>.

The Social Side of Technology: Is it worth it?

Admittedly, I'm cynical. If the human species truly valued privacy as much as we so loudly purport, I don't think Mark Zuckerberg would be as wealthy a man as he is.^{13 14} Who's to say that privacy is a virtue or that humans shouldn't yield self-control to Google's brilliant, top-secret marketing algorithms? Are the values that we readily claim to uphold in practices such as VSD true human values, if they're not so pervasively respected or aspired to? If our species would like to trade their digital privacy for digital friendships and endless entertainment, who's to say that it's wrong? What is wrong? Can wrong be measured?

¹³ Naughton, John. (15 November 2014). Why the internet has turned us into hypocrites. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/nov/16/why-internet-has-turned-us-into-hypocrites>.

¹⁴ David, Leonhardt. (12 November 2014). Americans say they want privacy, but act as if they don't. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/13/upshot/americans-say-they-want-privacy-but-act-as-if-they-dont.html?abt=0002&abg=0>.

Legal & Ethical Issues: Is it empty rhetoric?

Ethically, I think that the true takeaway of INFO 200 and the past few years since the PRISM break¹⁵ is that information is a manifestation of power—it is power—scientia potentia est. We discussed gender, cultural, and ability perspectives, values, the behavior of information, the capability of information to both do harm and aid others: the capability of information to save, heal, manipulate, deceive, exploit, monetize, convenience, satiate, and starve. What I understood was, “Information is more powerful and alluring than spices, salt, oil, and gold. Some people have lots, some people have less, some people have none; it’s stored in our bodies and our external devices, and its trade and distribution has an enormous impact across our species, from corporate espionage to basic literacy.” When the collection, sharing, denying, twisting, and selling of information effects even the most inane details around us, it becomes the human’s duty to wield it ethically, or, at least, for the benefit of the species. Whenever iTunes forcefully updates and gets subjectively hilariously worse and invasive, and I switch browsers and can’t use Adblock to hide from YouTube’s obnoxious commercials, I wonder, though, “Are we really going to wield it ethically, or is this just hot air and high fives?”

¹⁵ Gellman, Barton. (7 June 2013). US, British intelligence mining data from nine US Internet companies in broad secret program. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/us-intelligence-mining-data-from-nine-us-internet-companies-in-broad-secret-program/2013/06/06/3a0c0da8-cebf-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html.