

Negotiating Space Between Use and Non-Use

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ABSTRACT

People have numerous ways of negotiating their interaction with imperfect technologies. Descriptions of these practices can be found scattered throughout literature, but always at the edges, or mentioned as interesting cases. Rarely (if ever) are forms of negotiated use the central focus. This paper develops the concept of negotiated use as way of engaging with technology that shares attributes with both use and non-use as they are commonly understood in HCI.

Author Keywords

negotiated use; non-use; resistance; encryption; obfuscation

INTRODUCTION

Use and non-use are fuzzy terms without clear boundaries. While one person may consider herself a non-user because she hasn't logged in to a service for over a year, another might argue that because the account still exists she is still a user. I won't presume to draw definitive boundaries around or between these concepts, but rather want to draw attention to the blurry space that lies between use and non-use.

For example, during a recent set of interviews about another topic, I asked the question "Do you use any social network sites like Facebook or Twitter?" A frequent response was "well, I guess it depends on what you mean by *use*." Everyone who answered this way then went on to describe how they interact with social media in ways that they weren't sure would be considered 'use.' Stories emerged about practices where neither 'use' nor 'non-use' quite fit as accurate descriptors. These people don't consider themselves to be full users of the systems they were talking about, but they don't see themselves as non-users, either.

In the small (but growing) literature, non-use is frequently discussed within a framework where it is a state existing in

binary opposition to use. Hybrid practices that fall somewhere in the middle of this binary find ways to shine through, usually described as "creative work-arounds" [1], but I suspect they are often excluded from analyses of explicit non-use altogether. My intent is not to criticize this exclusion; we all have to draw borders around our areas of inquiry. What I am attempting here is to make a case for *also* attending to these in-between practices that can easily hide around the edges or fall through the cracks.

Existing work about non-use makes heavy use of language evoking notions of abandonment: leaving, departing, quitting, rejecting, refusing. My particular interest is in studying practices that result when a person has reason(s) to leave, but finds a way to stay. This description covers an overwhelming range of possibilities—including apathy or defeat. In this paper I will identify commonly cited motivations for leaving a technology¹; followed by a selection of examples that illustrate the concept of hybridized, or *negotiated* use. To better illustrate the range of what I'm describing, some examples will be drawn from my own data, and others from the literature.

REASONS TO LEAVE

A review of the literature on non-use reveals a wide variety of reasons that former users cite for leaving or abstaining from a particular technology. Frequently discussed motivations for non use include: poor quality of content or experience [1, 3], avoiding interpersonal conflict [1, 2, 10], political beliefs [8, 9], usability problems [6, 13, 14], monetary cost [11, 12], fashion or trendiness [1, 9], and in virtually every piece investigating non-use concerns around privacy and security are raised. These topics also invariably arise in descriptions of practices given by people engaging in negotiated use.

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¹ We can think about use or non-use at many different levels of granularity—whether at the level of features, product, device, platform, or infrastructure. For the purposes of this discussion I am not confining myself to one particular level of scale, and will be bouncing around quite a bit.

FINDING WAYS TO STAY

There are as many strategies employed to negotiate the use of technology as there are people engaging in negotiated use. Motivations to continue using a technology in the presence of a values conflict or other dissatisfaction are understudied in their own right, but some can be seen in the reactions from people ‘left behind’ by more traditional non-users. People who have deactivated or deleted their Facebook accounts report reactions from their social circle ranging from annoyance to extreme offense [1, 9]. There are other cases where using a particular technology can be an obligation entailed through professional or personal commitments. As has been discussed by Brunton & Nissenbaum [4] and Portwood-Stacer [9], the ability to opt out is often a privileged position. Some people “need...free email and cheap mobile phones” [5], and must exchange access to personal information and behavior in order to use these products and services.

Negotiated Use

When a person limits or alters their use of a product, platform, or service to counteract the effect of undesired features or effects, I have come to refer to this as *negotiated use*. The goal of negotiated use is to mitigate undesirable aspects of a technology where the discontent isn’t strong enough to result in complete departure, or where it isn’t possible or practical to completely cut off all use. In some cases this may involve introducing a new tool or service that is used in conjunction with the technology causing tension, as in the case of encryption. Other cases may consist of obfuscatory practices to thwart large-scale data collection, or more targeted tactics to address complaints with specific features or effects of a particular technology.

Encryption

While cryptography is embedded in many of the tools we use on a daily basis (https, SSL, etc.), encryption, once the bastion of the most elite geeks and hackers, is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. This resurgence has been building over the last few years among privacy advocates and activists, and the revelations made by the NSA files leaked by Edward Snowden have spread awareness to a much wider audience.

The effort involved varies depending on what is being encrypted and whether it stays on a hard drive or traverses a network. Many tools are available at no cost, but are complicated to install and configure, and in most cases recipients of encrypted messages must also be using the same software. The ability to encrypt digital communication allows individuals to negotiate their interaction with services and network protocols that send data over open channels [7].

The security provided by encryption enables people to use digital communication channels in ways that they might not use otherwise; it provides an alternative to refusal for those who would rather stay.

Obfuscation

Brunton and Nissenbaum [4] point out two asymmetries in the power dynamic of collecting user data on the web. First, that we are rarely able to *choose* whether or not to be monitored, nor do we have control over where that information goes or what might happen to us because of it. Second is the fact that most often we don’t know the full extent of the monitoring taking place. Obfuscation is “the production of misleading, ambiguous and plausible but confusing information as an act of concealment or evasion” [5], motivated by skepticism of, or uncertainty about data collection practices.

The umbrella of obfuscation covers a wide range of activities. Examples introduced by Brunton & Nissenbaum [4, 5] include the swapping of customer loyalty cards to confuse customer profiling efforts, the use of browser plugins like TrackMeNot to thwart the tracking of online behavior, and the use of fictitious information (pseudonyms, false birthdates, etc.) when completing profile information. Each of these activities is believed to protect the individual from being accurately captured in large datasets.

Atypical Use of Existing Technologies

Many of the examples shared under this (tentative) heading could be interpreted as data obfuscation, but I distinguish them here to highlight the difference in motivation. Obfuscation, as defined in the current literature, is explicitly motivated by anxiety about large-scale data collection (*i.e.* by governments or corporations), whereas there can certainly be other motivations involved.

One example of this kind of behavior is described by Boyd and Marwick [2], where a teen in their study would deactivate her Facebook account instead of logging out, and reactivate the next time she wanted to log in. This resulted in the teen only “existing” on Facebook while she was interacting with the system, which gave her control over potential surveillance from adults in her life, as well as the ability to monitor content posted by others on her timeline.

STUDYING NEGOTIATED USE

People have numerous ways of negotiating their interaction with imperfect technologies. Descriptions of these practices can be found scattered across a diverse swath of literature, but always at the edges, or mentioned as interesting cases. Rarely (if ever) are forms of negotiated use the central focus. This paper has been an initial attempt to develop the concept of negotiated use as way of engaging with technology that shares attributes with both use and non-use as they are commonly understood in HCI. There are many outstanding questions remaining to be answered, most notably: how to investigate negotiated use in a rigorous way? What methodological strategies can allow us, as researchers, to better understand the complex arrangements of resistance, obligation, and creativity that manifest in so many different ways?

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