Exploring the Ethics of Personal Data: The Ethical Dilemma Cafe

Overview: Ethical Dilemma Cafe

Collaborators: Open Data Manchester, BBC R&D, Mozilla, Victoria & Albert Museum.

Duration: 2022-ongoing

Scope: To create an interactive experience that explores the ethical implications of personal data collection and use in digital services through engaging, real-world scenarios.

Methodology:
- Pop-up exhibitions at various events and public spaces
- Interactive exhibits and games
- Physical demonstrations (e.g., Data Loom)
- Open-source approach for replication

Key Areas Explored:
- Personal data privacy
- The true cost of "free" digital services
- AI ethics
- Data rights and digital literacy

Key Outcomes:
- Development of various interactive exhibits (Happiness Index, Data Loom, Lost in Translation, Are You Listening?)
- Open-source resources for running Ethical Dilemma Cafe events
- Contributions to public discourse on data ethics

Impact:
- Increased public awareness of data ethics issues.
- Challenged participants to reconsider their relationship with personal data and digital services
- Fostered critical engagement with complex data ethics concepts
- Contributed to growing public discourse on data rights and digital literacy
- Empowered individuals to make more informed choices about their data

Introduction

Since 2022, Open Data Manchester has been a key collaborator in the Ethical Dilemma Cafe - an innovative, interactive experience that challenges participants to question the true cost of "free" services in the digital age. Developed in partnership with Mozilla, BBC R&D, and Lancaster University, this project explores the ethical implications of agency, personal data collection and use through engaging, physical real-world scenarios.

Open Data Manchester has participated in the Ethical Dilemma Cafe project at various locations: in 2022, they were at Feel Good Club (a cafe and bar in Manchester) and at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London, followed by Mozilla House festival in Amsterdam in 2023.

Free Coffee with a Twist

Originally developed by Ian Forrester and Jasmine Cox at BBC R&D for Mozilla Festival in 2014, the Ethical Dilemma Cafe operates as a pop-up exhibition at various events and public space, with each iteration designed to highlight different aspects of data ethics.

In 2022 in Manchester, visitors were enticed with the offer of free coffee - with a catch. To receive their beverage, participants were asked to scan a QR code and answer a personal question. Each subsequent "free" coffee required answering increasingly invasive questions, illustrating how digital services often extract more personal information than users might initially realise. The experience challenged participants to consider just how much personal data they were willing to share in exchange for free goods, highlighting the often-hidden costs of "free" online services.

Building on the success and insights gained from the Manchester experience, the Ethical Dilemma Cafe evolved its approach for its next major installation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, introducing new elements to further challenge participants' perceptions of data ethics.

Here, the project introduced a 'spin the wheel' game that exposed the manipulative nature of online gambling and video game loot boxes. Upon entry, participants received a free token to play, with the promise of winning treats like chocolate bars. However, the game was rigged - players never win the promised prize, instead being directed to participate in data-collecting exhibits to earn another spin. This setup demonstrated how seemingly fun or harmless online activities can lead users into cycles of data disclosure.

Evolving Conversations on Data Ethics

The Ethical Dilemma Cafe is designed to evolve to address the most pressing data ethics issues of our time. At MozFest 2022 in Manchester, the cafe included an "Anonymous-style" online hack demonstrating the environmental impact of data use, and a sound-based video game exploring accessibility in technology. The 2023 Amsterdam edition shifted focus to the growing field of AI ethics, reflecting the intense public debates surrounding artificial intelligence and its societal implications.

Open Data Manchester's Exhibits

By continually refreshing its content and focus, the project ensures that participants engage with the most relevant and thought-provoking aspects of data ethics by including a variety of exhibitions. Open Data Manchester has developed several exhibits that aim to make data ethics tangible and relatable, and to encourage participants to engage directly with complex concepts:

- **The Happiness Index**: Participants place a coloured Lego brick on a map to show where they're happiest, while sharing their current happiness level on a 0-10 scale.
- **The Data Loom**: A team member weaves "personal data" (actually participants' shoe colours) into fabric, encouraging people to consider what information is being collected about them.
- **Lost in Translation:** Visitors read a prepared text about surveillance into a microphone, with Google's Speech-to-Text API attempting to transcribe it in real-time. This highlights the limitations and potential biases of voice recognition technology.
- **Are You Listening?**: A speech-to-text program captures snippets of conversation and projects them onto the ceiling, demonstrating the intrusiveness of audio surveillance.

The conversations sparked by the Ethical Dilemma Cafe extend far beyond the physical space of the installation. They contribute to a growing public discourse on data rights, digital literacy, and the ethical use of technology. By making these complex topics accessible and relatable, the project plays a crucial role in fostering a more informed and critically engaged citizenry, capable of navigating the challenges of our increasingly data-driven world.

The Future of the Ethical Dilemma Cafe

All resources related to running a Cafe have been made openly available, encouraging organisations and individuals to run their own versions at events or in public spaces. This open-source approach not only expands the project's reach and impact but also embodies the principles of transparency and shared knowledge that are central to ethical data practices.

Open Data Manchester's approach to the Ethical Dilemma Cafe aligns with our mission to make data interesting and accessible to all. We believe that the most effective way to engage non-data people in discussions about data and its effects is to make it relevant to their everyday lives. By creating engaging, hands-on experiences, we aim to strike a delicate balance between entertainment and education, ensuring that participants have fun while also engaging with serious messages about data ethics and privacy.

The Ethical Dilemma Cafe can be a powerful tool for public engagement with data ethics. By combining interactive experiences with thought-provoking scenarios, it challenges participants to reconsider their relationship with personal data and digital services. As data becomes increasingly central to our lives, it can empower individuals to make more informed and critical choices about their data. By continuing to evolve and adapt, the Cafe can continue to explore the most pressing issues of our digital age, fostering a more data-aware society.

Testimonial

"Open data Manchester have been a fantastic partner, not only bringing their exhibits to the Ethical Dilemma Cafe framework and events but also helping BBC R&D and Mozilla to realise what is possible physically and technically. Their support for both the Manchester and London

V&A events has been unwavering and we will continue to work together for the Mozilla Global Festival in 2025 and beyond."

Ian Forrester – Senior Firestarter, BBC R&D