"Convince Us": An Argument for the Morality of Persuasion

Bran Knowles
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK
b.h.knowles@lancaster.ac.uk

Benjamin Wohl
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK
b.wohl@lancaster.ac.uk

Paul Coulton
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK
p.coulton@lancaster.ac.uk

Mark Lochrie
Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK
mark@barterproject.org

Abstract
This paper explores the difference between 'persuasion' and 'manipulation', both of which are instantiated in persuasive technologies to date. We present a case study of the system we are currently developing to foster local spending behavior by a community group — with sensitive implications for the community's sense of identity — and contrast our approach with what we would understand to be a manipulative approach. Our intention is to a) respond to anticipated critique that such a system could be interpreted as manipulative, b) present our argument for how persuasive technologies can be persuasive without being manipulative, and c) explain why, for this case study, its important that our approach be persuasive.

Author Keywords
Persuasion, rhetoric, interaction design

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous.

Introduction
The overwhelming majority of persuasive technology descends from the tradition of B.J. Fogg [6] (cf. [3]), and attempts to leverage empirically validated psychological tendencies toward the completion of desired behavior.

Users are expected to accept the basic premise of the 'correctness' of the designers' chosen end behavior; and the designer is not expected to have to rigorously debated the preferability of this end behavior. This is largely a byproduct of persuasive technology researchers' avoidance of controversial framings of problems; but as a result, the issue of whether the techniques of so-called 'persuasion' are indeed manipulative has escaped serious scrutiny within the computing community.

Our position in this paper is not that persuasive technologies of this ilk are always manipulative; nor that being manipulative is inherently unethical. What we argue, instead, is that very different ethical questions are raised by technologies such as these, which *induce* behavior change, compared with those that engage users' deliberative capabilities and *persuade*, in the original, rhetorical sense of the term [2]. In particular, we suggest that technologies that aim to offer solutions to genuinely 'wicked' problems that users may understand and interpret rather differently than the designers, it is inappropriate to induce behavior change (i.e. manipulate behavior). By way of demonstrating this, we discuss our chosen wicked problem and plan for solving it, how this differs from manipulation, and what we understand to be ethical about our approach.

Case Study

Recently, there has been much concern by the UK policy makers and public surrounding the 'death' of town centers [7]. One of the most highly publicized investigations of this problem [12] points to the discount prices available from mega retail outlets and the convenience of online shopping as major factors in this decline. The problem has been attributed more broadly by others to a problematic 'leaking' [13] of money away from local communities, depleting local wealth with consequences not only to these economies but also to social capital and associated indicators of wellbeing [10] (cf. [15]). In an effort to revive areas where the local economy is in decline, as well as to stave off potential decline in new areas, communities are increasingly turning toward local currencies [8]. The thinking behind these currencies is to create a wealth pool that cannot be siphoned out of the community. The problem is, these often fail [4] for a range of practical reasons — and, we suggest, because local currencies have no inherent rhetorical potential. In other words, there is no dialectic element in the currency itself that can demonstrate to individuals who are *not* sold on the genius of local spending why it will help revive their community.

We are currently developing a system (BARTER) that is designed to demonstrate to people why spending locally is in the long-term interest of their community. Specifically, we are attempting to leverage mobile and ubiquitous computing to overcome the need for an alternative currency altogether. Instead, BARTER provides an information layer on top of existing currency (pounds sterling) which shows the flow of money around and out of the community. Both customer-to-business and business-to-business transactions are recorded (using NFC cards at a mobile terminal), enabling us to represent a dynamic map of where money is being spent — highlighting, especially, when and where money is 'leaking' out of the community. Using algorithms based on the local multiplier effect [14], we are able to represent the overall growth in wealth attributable to local spending, and the overall reduction in wealth attributable to non-local spending. In contrast to the problem raised above regarding local currencies, the system engages users in a discussion about the relative desirability of short-term individual savings (e.g. at mega retail outlets or online shops) and long-term community impacts that may result.

The aim of BARTER is not (simply) to get people to spend locally. After all, we are not economists, and it is possible that what BARTER will show is that there is no community benefit to spending locally. We do not, therefore, attempt to design mechanisms that make it more likely that individuals will spend locally (e.g. providing incentives or positive reinforcement). It is our position that doing so would be unethical: who are we to tell people what is right for them and their community? Indeed, who are we to fundamentally alter the character of a community from the top-down, forcing a community to adopt a certain ethos? Granted, we (the researchers) consider ourselves part of the community in question; but nonetheless, is it ethical to impose our ideology on a group of individuals without their knowledge and approval?

At the same time, we certainly do believe as the designers of this system that people *should* make a greater effort to spend locally. And our reason for designing this system is to *convince* people of our position, and in so doing, make it more likely that people will change their behavior in accordance with this belief. Further, we believe that, just as it is generally considered immoral to not seek to change things in the world that one sees as harming one's fellow humans[1], we have an obligation to try to do what we can to correct this problem. We would argue for this reason that no persuasive technology — manipulative or persuasive — can be dismissed on the grounds of attempting to engineer a more desirable result. (All policies attempt to do just that.) The ethical dilemma, however, is how one attempts this engineering.

[1] In the words of the Dalai Lama, 'Each individual has a universal responsibility to shape institutions to serve human needs.'

Consider, for the sake of discussion, a fictional persuasive technology that helps people who are addicted to life threatening drugs to quit. There is broad consensus that this addiction is harming the individual, and that it would be more desirable if they would stop. In this instance, it seems generally ethical to use a more manipulative approach that relies on psychological responses conducive to behavior change (with the potential caveat that the user must agree to using the system and know what it is for). The reason this feels okay is because it is consistent with the consensus view. This does not mean, however, that it is apolitical; rather, the ideology underpinning this is largely invisible because it aligns with a predominant value set or worldview, and the solution is culturally vetted to some extent.

Compare this to BARTER, the influence of which is more noticeable in part because it presents a counter-narrative to the dominant faith in the utility of the free market [11], daring to suggest that the global free market may not necessarily work toward the greatest wellbeing of individuals or communities. The burden of proof, if you will, is with us to show that this alternative view is preferable.

This suggests that a fundamentally different approach to persuasion is in order — one that attempts to alter behavior by 'engaging users in a discourse about the behavior itself or the logics that would recommend such actions or beliefs' [1, p. 60–1]. Such is the approach of 'persuasive games', many of which work by revealing the ideologies that 'drive social, political, or cultural behavior' [ibid, p. 62] so that they can be reflected upon. In particular, persuasive games can show how various structures fail, or how seemingly intuitive behaviors work against one's interest, thereby providing players with opportunities to rethink and potentially adopt alternative behaviors. Without actually (necessarily[2]) developing a game, BARTER aligns with this less mainstream computing approach to persuasion.

Ethical issues considered

Zelizer [16] has argued that people express values through money — one of the reasons, potentially, for the establishment of local currencies as an alternative, bespoke expression. While there is some debate about whether this view of money is valid (cf. [5]), we are aware of the potential that an intervention like BARTER has regarding a community's expression of values associated with their collective sense of identity. By getting people to contemplate the impacts of spending behavior on others within their community — and doing so within a system that showcases various ethical accreditations (e.g. making visible whether a business is fairtrade in addition to how much of their revenue they spend back into the community) — we are clearly activating and prioritizing a set of values associated with Benevolence [9], i.e. bigger-than-self concern for people in one's social circle.

We do not think that taking such a position (*care for others is good*) is controversial, or that designing a system to support ostensibly desirable traits is in any way unethical. But we are careful to involve the users of our system, and those potentially impacted by its use by others, in an open discussion about the project. In our original research plan, we intended to involve the local ethical small traders association in a participatory design process. After much deliberation, we decided that while this group might have been enthusiastic participants, they did not adequately represent the wider community. We are now undertaking a service design approach, involving interviews with various stakeholders — not for them to actively shape the system design, but more to engage with community members to discuss potential implications of the system. In part, this provides a useful check so that we avoid designing something completely disconnected from a set of broadly shared community values. It also gives us a baseline read on community values as a means of measuring any influence our system may have once deployed. Having said that, we have already largely agreed upon the design of the system, and the most important insight we seek to gain through our ethnographic work is to understand the current barriers to spending locally, so that we can effectively represent information that enables different spending behavior.

It is important to make clear that BARTER is rather unique in the sense that the persuasion is aimed at a community, rather than an individual. It is unfeasible to get consent of all the people in the community who may be affected by the system. For this and other reasons, we have made every effort to avoid manipulating people's behavior by making it easier or more likely to do one behavior over another. What we can do, however, is present information in a way that provokes deliberation, and make a convincing argument for the desirability of that behavior change. What we aim to do, in fact, is not to produce a particular behavior (local spending) *per se*; but rather to create a new *sensibility* about the relationship between individual spending behavior and community impacts. The only appropriate form of persuasion here, for what is ultimately a political endeavor, is *rhetorical*.

[2] BARTER is a work in progress.

Conclusion

The case study we have presented here makes a political argument for behavior change by a community. What the community does with this system is up to them. We can but make our case.

Acknowledgements

This research is made possible by EPSRC grants EP/K012584/1 and EP/I033017/1. The project is in collaboration with Michael Hallam of the Ethical Small Traders Association.

References

[1] Bogost, I. *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. MIT Press, 2007.

[2] Braet, A. C. Ethos, pathos and logos in aristotle's rhetoric: A re-examination. *Argumentation 6*, 3 (1992), 307–320.

[3] Brynjarsdóttir, H., Håkansson, M., Pierce, J., Baumer, E. P., DiSalvo, C., and Sengers, P. Sustainably unpersuaded: how persuasion narrows our vision of sustainability. In *Proc. CHI'12*, ACM (2012), 947–956.

[4] Collom, E. Community currency in the united states: the social environments in which it emerges and survives. *Environment and Planning A 37*, 9 (2005), 1565.

[5] Evans, M. S. Zelizer's theory of money and the case of local currencies. *Environment and planning. A 41*, 5 (2009), 1026.

[6] Fogg, B. J. *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do*. Morgan Kauffman, San Francisco, 2003.

[7] Guardian, T. High street shops in 'death spiral', warns veteran retailer. *[online]* (2nd February 2012).

[8] Helleiner, E. Think globally, transact locally: Green political economy and the local currency movement. *Global society 14*, 1 (2000), 35–51.

[9] Holmes, T., Blackmore, E., and Hawkins, R. *The Common Cause Handbook*. Public Interest Research Centre Ltd, Machynlleth, Wales, 2011.

[10] Hopkins, R. The power of just doing stuff. *Totnes: Green Books* (2013).

[11] Michaels, F. *Monoculture: How One Story is Changing Everything*. Red Clover Press, 2011.

[12] Portas, M., and Britain, G. *The Portas Review: An independent review into the future of our high streets*. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011.

[13] Ward, B., Lewis, J., Britain, G., and Unit, N. R. *Plugging the Leaks: Making the most of every pound that enters your local economy*. New Economics Foundation London, 2002.

[14] Wikipedia. Local multiplier effect. `http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_multiplier_effect`.

[15] Wilkinson, R. G., Pickett, K., and Chafer, C. *The spirit level*. Bloomsbury Press, 2011.

[16] Zelizer, V. A. R. *The social meaning of money*. Princeton University Press, 1997.