

Your Terms of Service: Interactive Audio Installation

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ABSTRACT

“Your Terms of Service” is an audio installation leveraging a newly developed method of audio output synchronization via signal analysis to highlight the power our mobile devices have over our individual rights, thoughts and actions in modern society.

The piece gives voice to the digital assistants who embody the underlying algorithms, decision engines and nudges that shape us.

The installation and performance of this piece would be a world premiere at WAC 2022.

1. INTRODUCTION

The mass-adoption of smartphones has ushered in the greatest behavioural and conditioning experiment in the history of our species. Our devices exert untold power over our perspectives, decisions and understanding of the world. “Your Terms of Service” brings this power imbalance to light, by giving voice to the products that harvest our time and attention, downgrading us as humans. [1]

2. DESCRIPTION

2.1. Description of the Artwork



“Your Terms of Service” is an audio installation performed via the attendees’ smartphone speakers. Using a method of synchronising the audio output of multiple mobile devices (developed in partnership with Jeroen van Tubergen), the audience is directed to visit a website that instructs them to turn on the speaker of their phone, increase the volume and enter the installation space.

The installation space consists of an arrangement of 16 apple iphone smartphones, plugged into power and suspended from the ceiling in a constellation ~3 metres above the ground. The suspended phones are already synchronised and playing the audio in unison. When the visitor enters the space, their personal phone begins playback of the audio via their built-in speakers, joining the installed phones in the playback of the audio.

For this premiere of the piece, the audio consists of the official voice persona of Siri, reading the Apple Terms of Service document in its entirety. The synchronised output of synthesised speech across many small speakers creates a sourceless voice,

emanating in a cloud around the spectators. The slight latency between the devices gives each device a unique part in this mass reading, a dark army of devices speaking in unison to their “owners.”

This scenario offers the audience an opportunity to confront their own relationships with their smartphone: each person is holding (for some) their most prized possession as it reads the dry, endless legalese of a terms of service document, as though reading some variation of a 21st-century digital Miranda rights.

It calls into question who is serving whom, and the powerful illusion that we are in control of our own lives, decisions and behavior.

It too provides an uncanny scenario for attendees to witness one another as complicit participants in this new, tech-led power paradigm. This puts into the focus the dire situation of humans, in a room, in opposition to mass adoption of convenient, distracting and attention-harvesting technology, and see one another as allies against this many-voiced, faceless power of the tech companies behind these devices who are designing our lives without us knowing it. [2]

It presents a unique opportunity for attendees to hear (and see) the contract that they have signed (often without reading) with these companies: not only in its length (60 minutes at a brisk reading pace of 160 WPM) but also its uncanny use of unnatural language to obscure the true meaning and implications of the terms.

“Your Terms of Service” brings this imbalance to life in a visceral way, for the attendees to experience emotionally more so than logically. My goal with this piece is to help attendees re-examine their relationship to their most intimate piece of technology, recognize that they are losing the battle for their own time and attention, and enact sustainable change in their own lives to regain control.

2.2. Requirements of WAC 2022

For the installation, we would require a small room with a door that can be closed. The required phones, power supplies, mounting, suspending and the necessary synchronization equipment can be provided by the artist.

The artist will also photograph and film portions of the installation, including (with permission) attendees interacting with it. These materials will be used for future proposals for larger-scale installations with greater complexity (such as including android phones with google terms of service agreements, a larger number of phones suspended from the ceiling, etc.)

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3. ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

baern is the living music project of non-binary sound artist & composer Brian Barth (they). Brian's work revolves around composition for audience co-creation, interactivity, digital aleatory and living music. They are the founder of fvelo, a music label dedicated to living music; releasing interactive, generative, location-based, and all other types of non-linear or boundless works. Brian has been working in collaboration with several previous WAC attendees, including Jeroen van Tubergen, Alex Bainter, and Paul Paroczai.

4. REFERENCES

1. Harris, Tristan *Wired* (Apr. 2019), <https://www.wired.com/story/tristan-harris-tech-is-downgrading-humans-time-to-fight-back/>
2. Harris, Tristan *Wired* (Mar. 2016). ***Tech Companies Are Designing Your Life — Here's Why You Should Care*** <https://medium.com/thrive-global/tech-companies-design-your-life-here-s-why-you-should-care-e962f412cc81>