

Creative methods for articulating community voices on AI

Manu Luksch, Mukul Patel & The People Speak

CONTENTS

Introduction 2

Layering & iteration: a creative approach 4

Method: *Talkaoke* 8

Method: *Phones on Holiday* 10

Method: *Clay Sculpting* 12

Method: *A Day in the Life* 14

Method: *Third Person Fictions* 16

Method: *Data Shadow Theatre* 20

- *The Interview* 22
- *The Contract* 23
- *The Anxiety Opera* 24
- *The World Is My Oyster... Card* 26
- *It All Began With 'I'* 28
- *Alone, Together* 30
- *My Friend* 32

Method: *Codesign Sprint* 34

About Us / Credits 35

First print edition of 400 (London: AIS, 2025)
www.ambienttv.net

Introduction

As part of the 2024 Public Voices in AI commissions, Manu Luksch, Mukul Patel and The People Speak collaborated to offer a series of workshops about AI to two community groups in Tower Hamlets, London – teenage clients of Streets of Growth, a charity for young people facing diverse harms, and adult clients of Mind, the mental health and wellbeing organisation. Members of these groups face particular difficulties in mitigating unwanted impacts of AI. Each group of 12 participants took part in six 2-hour workshops, in which they were introduced to a range of creative tools, techniques and exercises to articulate their beliefs, hopes and concerns about AI.

AI has made stunning advances in specific fields – playing games such as chess and go, or determining protein structure. Computer vision systems based on deep learning models are becoming increasingly robust; Big Tech corporations continue to make extravagant promises. Yet many experts, including pioneers in the field, warn of impending social and technological apocalypse.

As AI systems expand to touch all aspects of our lives, shouldn't we have a say in how – and even whether – these dramatically powerful technologies are designed and deployed? When AI is used to determine conditions for loans, visas or prison sentences, or to allocate resources in education and healthcare, shouldn't we have the ability and the right to scrutinise how decisions are made? How can public voices on these matters be encouraged, informed, and made audible to engineers, policymakers and regulators? Where is the forum for citizens to make their desires and interests heard?

This booklet shares the principal methods used to explore these questions with the two community groups, and documents some of the outcomes. The major creative outputs, the *Data Shadow Theatre* films, are available via the QR code below.

https://vimeo.com/showcase/11542531

The biggest issue currently in global and national advocacy is the lack of voice of 'affected subjects' – people who are affected by AI. They might be affected because the AI is making decisions about them, but it might also be because AI is providing them information.

– Sarah Andrew, legal counsel at Avaaz; consultant for this project (personal communication)

Without diminishing the difficulties faced by vulnerable populations, we all transact with information systems, and so are all 'affected subjects'. But by continuing to listen to individuals in diverse situations and from disparate communities, we might identify edge cases and experiences early. The design of fora and processes to integrate citizens in the conception, specification and deployment of AI is a formidable challenge. Methods that amplify public voices and broaden discussion are measured steps towards that goal.



Layering & iteration: a creative approach

Given the diversity of ages, backgrounds, needs, interests, and skillsets of members of each group, both workshop series had to be meticulously designed to ensure that sessions remained inclusive and unthreatening, while being challenging, illuminating and fun for all.

Luksch & Patel designed a staged process of creation over successive workshop sessions, based on layering and iteration. Different media and techniques were progressively introduced over the series, and participants' interim creations reworked and processed before being brought in to the next workshop session. Iterative techniques have been used extensively by Luksch & Patel in creating performance, installation and intermedia art. This methodology complemented that of The People Speak, whose approach values the non-predetermined and aims to foster space for new thinking through emergent, organic conversation-based practices.

For each group, the workshop series was bracketed by The People Speak's *Talkaoke* facilitated-conversation format. The initial session helped us gauge prior knowledge and establish topics of interest and concern; in the final workshop it worked as an informal evaluation. Between these sessions, workshop activities were staged and sequenced using the layering and iteration methodology, progressively

transforming and assembling provisional outputs from successive sessions. For example, discursive exercises were recorded, and this sonic material was made available for later manipulation, using electronics effects units. Salient audio passages were transcribed and printed as speech bubbles on paper, to re-present participants' own words to themselves. In a following workshop, the group used these speech bubbles as graphic elements in a diagramming exercise to identify their daily encounters with technologies (*A Day In The Life*). During a later scriptwriting session, the quotes on the speech bubbles were used in dialogue creation. An advantage of the layering and iteration approach is that it allows for creation of complex works while accommodating occasional absences or irregular attendance by participants.

While we value participant-centred design and adapted our methods on an ad hoc basis as needed, we sustained the staged process in order to assure the creation of rich, collaborative output. With an eye to possible application in advocacy and campaigning contexts, we guided both groups towards the production of a short film – an easily-distributed format that can accommodate a very broad range of contributions in different media, while also respecting participant's differing desires for privacy.

Workshop sessions typically began with a brief collective check-in led by The People Speak to welcome participants and address particular desires and concerns. Check-ins helped each person to 'arrive' in the space before embarking on the main activity. Luksch & Patel would then offer a prompt or provocation to engage participants with a topic, before unfolding the creative method specific to that session. Prompts included:

- a news report on AI decision-making in the NHS for liver transplant allocation,
- a podcast clip revealing remote human labour ('Actually Indians') in supposedly AI-managed Amazon Fresh stores, and
- a life-cycle analysis of an AI ecosystem from mineral extraction and chip fabrication to data centre operations and e-waste disposal.

According to the activity, media and tools on offer included a wide range of drawing materials, modelling clay, acetates and an overhead projector, costume, performance techniques, and electronic voice effectors and drum machines.

As each workshop series progressed, the space gradually transformed. Initially set up for round-table discussion, it then took form as a drawing and sculpture studio before becoming a music production space with breakout zones and sessions dedicated to voice recording and beat creation. In the final sessions, we introduced a large backlit screen for shadow play and rear projection, transforming the space into a a shadow theatre and production studio.

Method: *Talkaoke*

Talkaoke is an interactive participant-led talkshow format by The People Speak. The host sits in the middle of a glowing table; participants sit around the outside, taking turns to speak on the mic and listen to each other. The table has an in-built audio recorder, and a sound effects unit that the host uses to animate the conversation.



A powerful tool for building connection and stimulating collective imagination, *Talkaoke* works with immediate live interaction, often leading to unexpected insights and ideas. Experienced hosts use techniques such as staying neutral, creative linking, active listening, and 'building the bridge from the other side'. The undetermined, emergent nature of this approach creates spaces for new thinking.

We used *Talkaoke* for the first session with each group to help us gauge their familiarity with AI and related technologies, establish topics of interest, and identify challenges faced by individuals that would inform the design of subsequent activities.

For the adult group, whose participants were regular users of health and social services, the use of AI in the NHS was a major importance. There was also concern about the increasing prevalence of app-based technological systems in every aspect of daily life. Having grown up before the dawn of ubiquitous computing, this group was able to imagine the possibility of non-technological solutions to personal and societal issues.

For the teenagers, a primary issue was the trustworthiness of online information, especially that pushed to them in social media feeds. Many of the participants had used ChatGPT as a homework assistant, or other chatbots on social media platforms. Their visions for what future AI might look like typically involved hyper-intelligent humanoid robots. These topics were explored more deeply in one-to-one conversations during later workshops, in which they questioned the reliability of chatbot outputs, proposed novel uses for personal robots – such as acting as proxies in physical fights – and considered how a court for robots might operate.

Could an AI have empathy? Could it understand how you feel?

Talkaoke was also used in the final sharing sessions where it allowed participants to further articulate ideas among invited academics and stakeholders. The adult group highlighted intergenerational gaps and expressed concern for teenagers; the teenage participants raised issues of online representation, such as the impact of beauty standards on mental health.

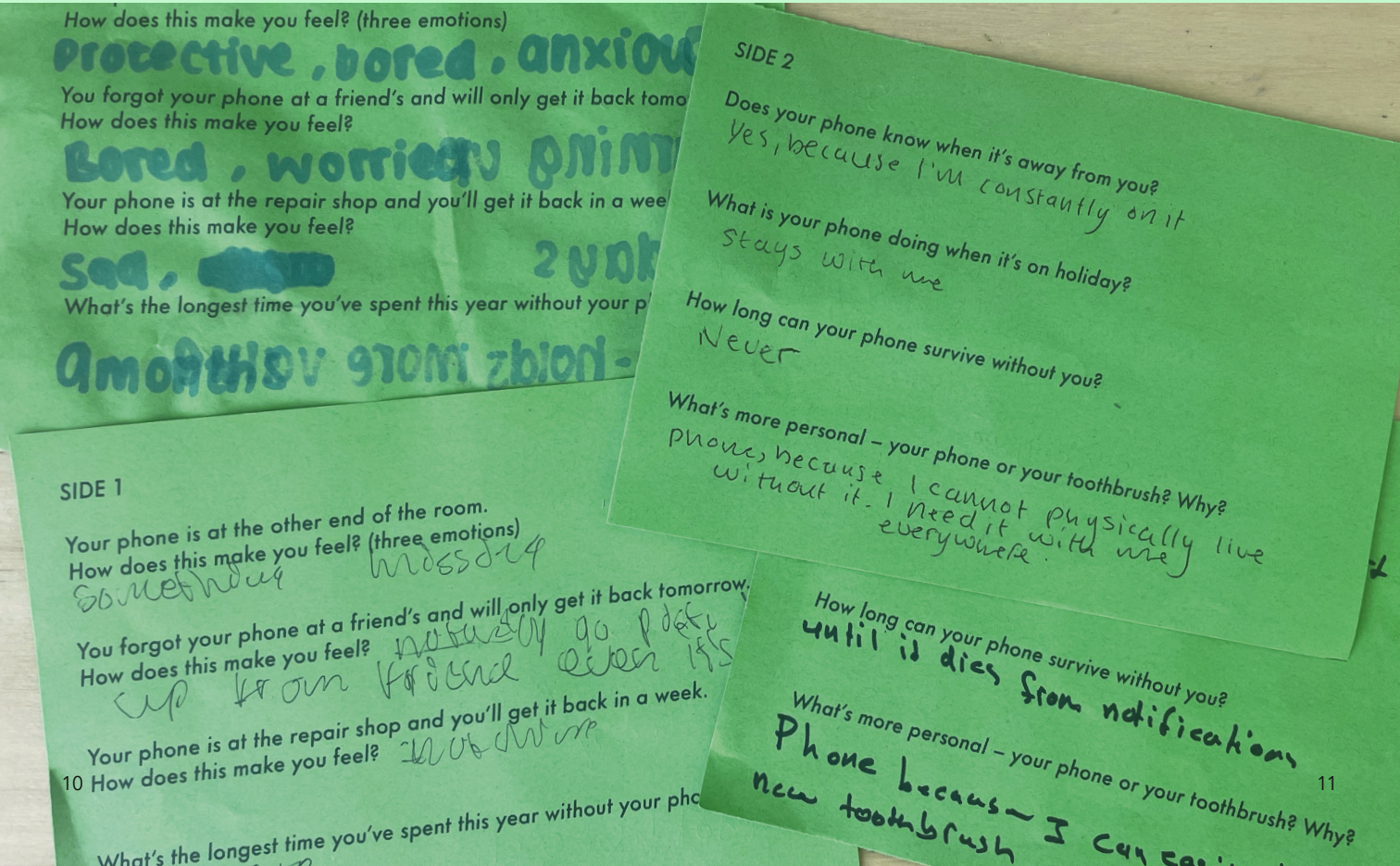
Method: *Phones on Holiday*

This preliminary exercise was designed by Luksch to focus teenage participants' attention in the workshop space. A table covered with a beach towel was arranged at one end of the room, under a screen playing a seaside sunset and the sound of crashing waves. Participants sent their phones 'on holiday' by placing them on the towel and retreating as far as comfortable. They were then asked a series of questions – about their emotions on being parted from their devices, about how the devices might behave without them... Their responses revealing a subtle appreciation of their entanglement with technology. Following the exercise, participants were much less distracted by their devices.

– How long can your phone survive without you?
– *Until the battery dies from notifications…*
– *A long time, years and years.*
– *I can't survive without my phone, my phone can't survive without me*

– Does your phone know when it's away from you?
– *If Face ID or my password don't work, it probably knows it's away.*
– *Yeah, because it misses my hand.*
– *I'm pretty sure if nothing's interacting with my phone then it knows no-one's using it.*

A final question asked which item was more personal, a phone or a toothbrush; participants invariably and unhesitatingly responded 'my phone'.



Method: *Clay Sculpting*

How can something as opaque and nebulous as AI, that persists across processors and servers 'somewhere in the cloud', be made tangible? This question motivated an activity in which participants made their ideas manifest through sculpting with air-drying modelling clay, wires and other small components. Led by Luksch & Patel, the method builds on Luksch's prior use of elementary materials with a children-led architectural design bureau. The act of working with clay generated a calm, contemplative atmosphere, far from the hype and frenzy of online media-space. Moreover, the sculptors' hands were fully occupied – and so phone–free. Participants presented their completed sculptures to a rostrum (overhead) camera, elaborating on their designs and describing their visions. With only their hands in the frame, those who had previously been quite reticent became much more vocal.

– *I've created a robot and called it 'King of AI', because it contains all the information.*
– Where does it get its information from?
– *You could say it developed it on its own.*
– What does it want to do, being King of AI?
– *Share information to other robots – and those robots give it up to the public.*

Although all the sculptures took the form of humanoid robots, they served as a basis for conversations about processes and relations such as the material and energy needs of computer manufacture, property rights in data and machines, information flows and hierarchies, accountability of self-driving cars, and job losses to automation.

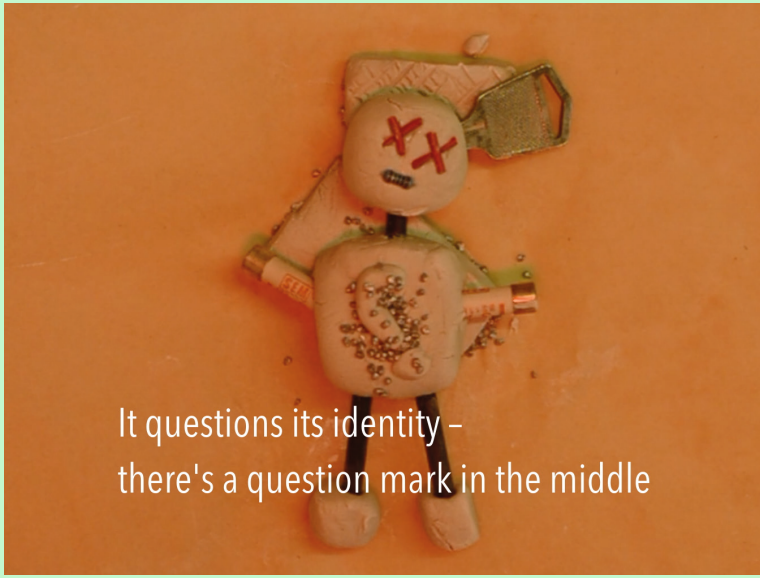
The robot creations were generally benign and personal, and far from the apocalyptic visions of 'AI takeover'. There was disagreement on the rights that AI/robots might acquire, with one participant maintaining the primacy of creator rights:

– Do you think you should be able to switch it off… to kill it?
– *Yeah, because I created it, so I have the right to do whatever I want with it.*

Another suggested that ecological constraints might dominate:

– *No, that's wasteful… I care about my environment.*

The undeniable materiality of the clay suggested questions – where did it come from? where will it end up after use? – that participants were then prompted to ask about AI and related technologies.



Method: *A Day in the Life*

How aware are we of the extent of technological mediation in our lives? Participants were asked to systematically revisit each of their encounters with technological systems on a specific or typical day – beginning, for example, with the morning alarm on their mobile phone. They then illustrated this sequence of encounters using a combination of text, drawing, icons pre-printed on acetate, and speech bubbles with salient quotations taken from earlier sessions. (The speech bubbles function to emphasize the significance of statements that might have been made very casually, in passing, while maintaining the lightness of the conversational mode.) The *Day in the Life* diagrams fed into the subsequent workshop for transformation through the *Third Person Fictions* method.

The diagramming task borrows a method devised by Yasmine Boudiaf in a prior collaboration with Luksch & Patel that also investigated public attitudes to AI. That work, part of a BRAID UK project, is documented in the video *AI In My Street?* (accessible via this project's QR code).

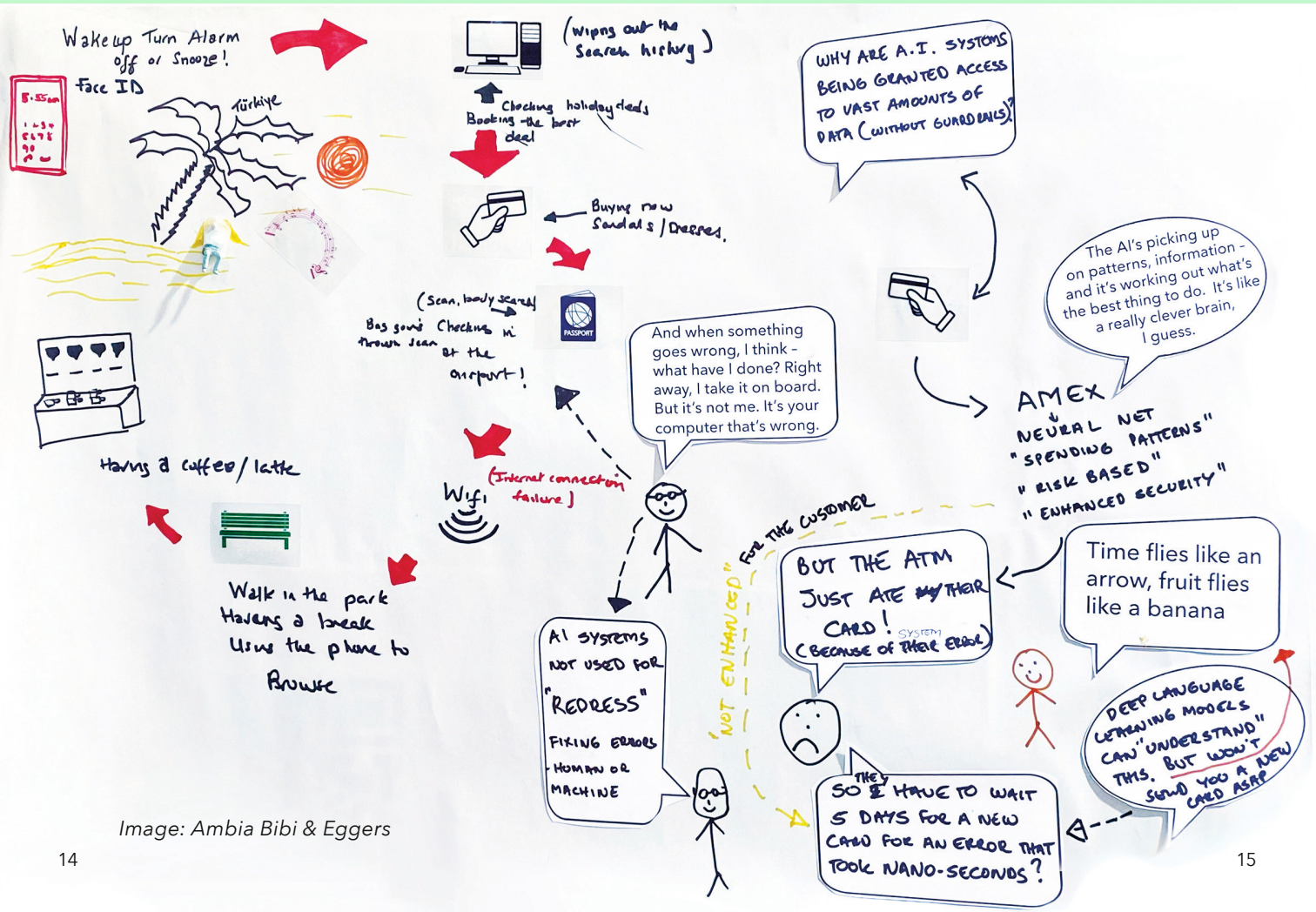


Image: Ambia Bibi & Eggers

Method: *Third Person Fictions*

This method is a variant of the 'tactical fiction' approach used by Luksch in several short film works. Having detailed *A Day in the Life* through diagrams, participants took turns to individually relate their encounters with technology to the group – but using the third person perspective of a fictional character. By doing so, they abstracted from their personal experience – allowing them to reflect afresh on the encounters, while holding any traumatic aspects at a distance, and setting the stage for further fictional elaboration.

Working in pairs, participants then brought their characters together in conversation, constructing short dialogues around a specific AI-related scenario. In some cases, they took the roles of a human and an AI in conversation; in others, they both played humans who were messily embroiled within some technological system. Spanning the gamut from poignant to outraged to the laugh-out-loud, these dialogues would be staged as shadow play vignettes during the concluding activity of the *Data Shadow Theatre*.



Image: Daniella Gambardella

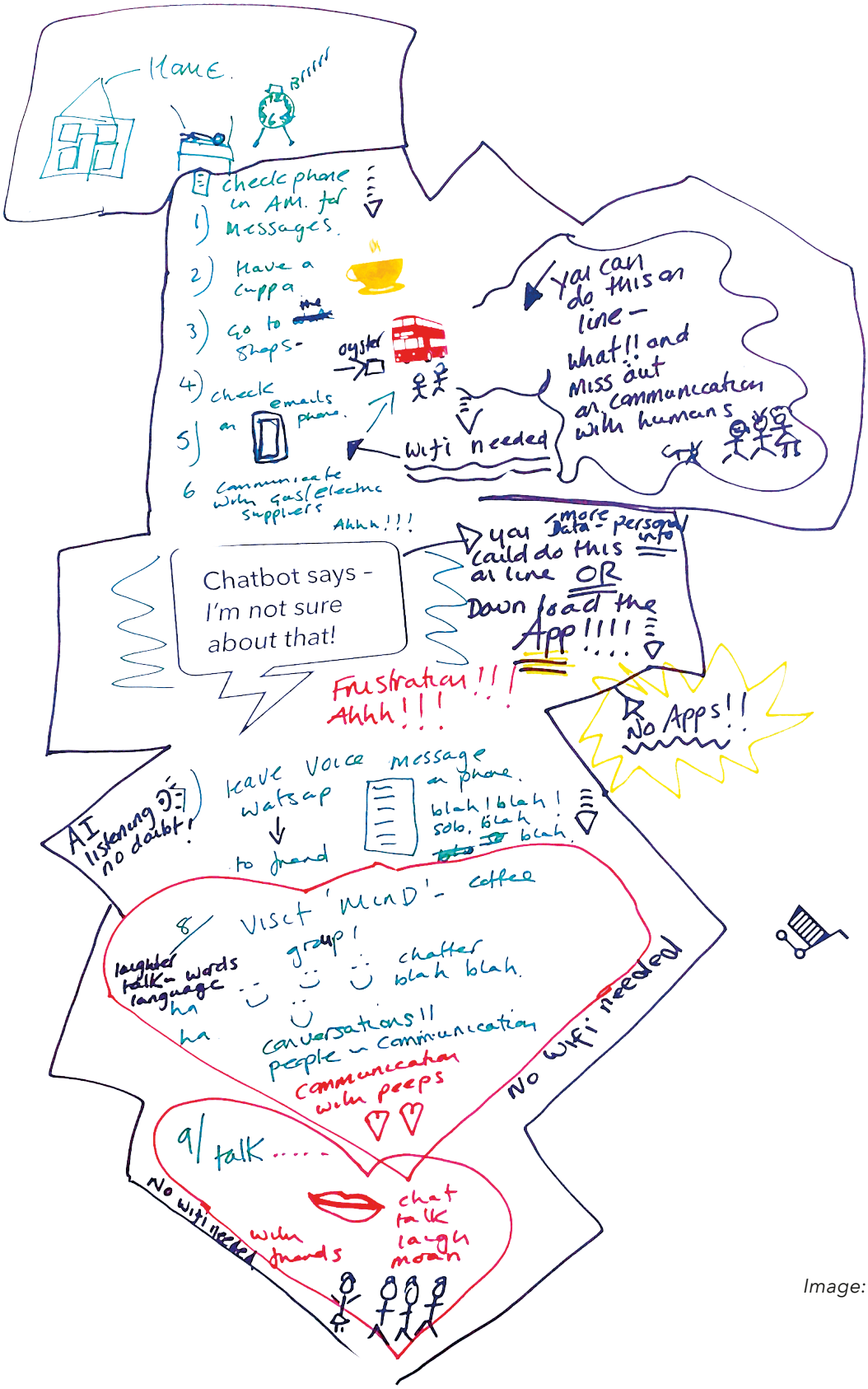
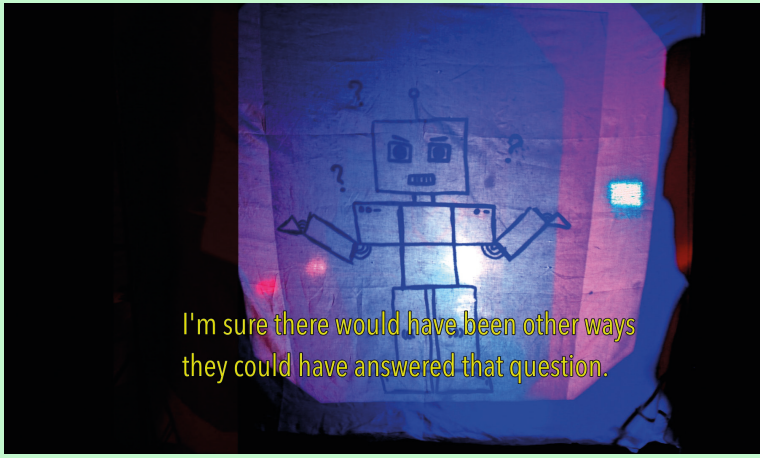

Home.
Brrrrr!
check phone in AM. for messages.
2) Have a cuppa
3) Go to shops-
oyster
4) check emails on phone.
5)
6 Communicate with gas/electric suppliers
Ahhh!!!
Wifi needed
You can do this on line – what!! and miss out on communication with humans
Chatbot says - I'm not sure about that!
You could do this on line OR Download the App!!!!
more data - personal info
Frustration!!! Ahhh!!!
No Apps!!
AI listening no doubt!
leave voice message on phone.
watsap
to friend
blah! blah! solo. blah blah.
Visit 'MIND' - coffee
laughter talk - words language
ha
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group!
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conversations!!
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No wifi needed
No WiFi needed

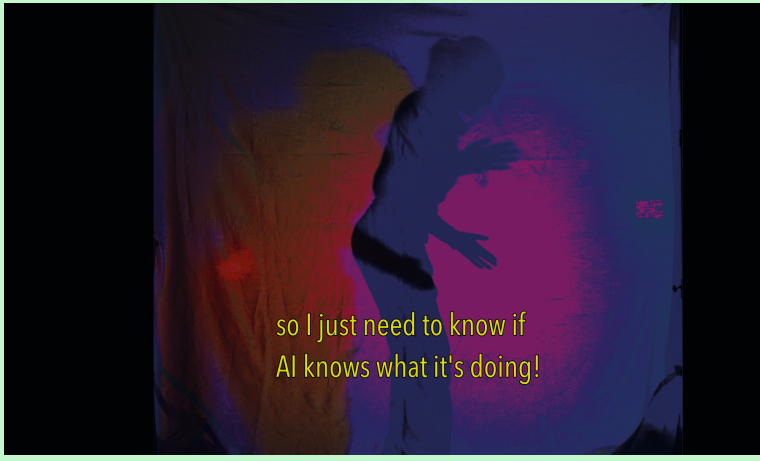
Image: Kaybo

Method: *Data Shadow Theatre*

Conceived by Luksch & Patel as the culmination of their layering methodology, the *Data Shadow Theatre* brings together participants' vignettes, diagrams, drawings, poetry, music and speech recordings into a short film format. The workshop space was transformed into a film set, recording stage and production studio. A large white cotton sheet was suspended across the space, backlit with coloured LED filming lamps and an overhead projector for displaying background images drawn on acetate. Participants acted out their dialogues as shadow play vignettes behind the screen, performing to the rest of the group and to camera. Shadow play allowed performers to act and be filmed while remaining anonymous; it also encouraged expression from the stage-shy. Elsewhere in the space, there were zones for writing, drawing and working with audio. The production ran on a rolling basis over several workshop sessions – while some participants were devising vignettes, others were performing them, or creating sound and images. The filmed material was edited and combined with other workshop outputs (sound, images, poetry) in collaboration with the participants.

The vignettes, illustrated in the following pages, encompass scenarios from AI chatbots in recruitment to facial recognition on urban transit networks. One performance was created around a poem that alerted smartphone users to tracking and surveillance by app providers. The short films are available online via the project QR code.







The Interview
Daniella Gambardella & Runu Miah

A candidate for a job is interviewed by an AI chatbot, but rejected. Later, in an exchange with its AI overseer, the chatbot justifies its decisions by suggesting that the buses could be automated, like London's DLR trains.



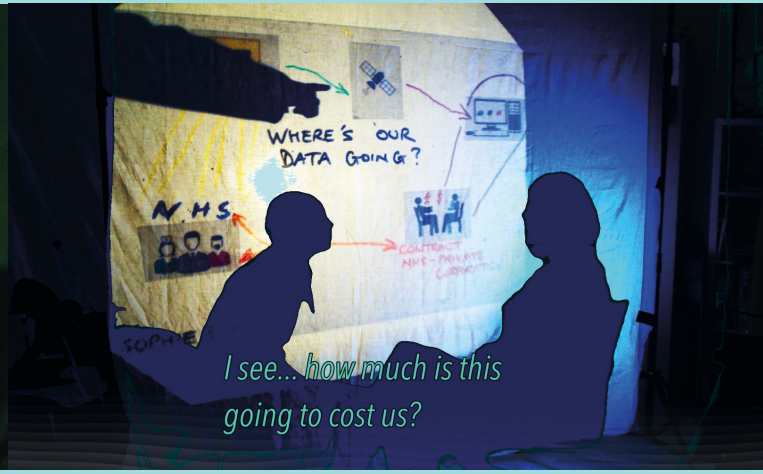
AI's going to put people with lower skills out of work.

Themes

Many companies already use AI screening to filter out job candidates. Are these systems fair and accurate? Do they make decisions for the right reasons and in compliance with anti-discrimination laws? If companies choose to replace human workers with AI, because it's more efficient – that is, it ensures greater profits – then should these profits be taxed to generate funds towards Universal Basic Income? Should we tax the robots?

The Contract
Sophie Stardust & Margot Przymierska

A health service manager and the CEO of a tech corporation discuss bringing in automation to ensure the service hit its targets.



When you go through the terms and conditions, you're swiping, swiping, swiping... You're not going to read it all, even if you're not dyslexic. But if you don't accept, you don't get in.

Themes

Health data, especially if collected over many years by a universal provider like the UK's NHS, can be hugely valuable in identifying causes of diseases and disorders. In the case of the publicly-funded NHS, this data is a national resource. If the management and analysis of this data is outsourced to private corporations, what safeguards are in place to ensure that the public benefits?

The Anxiety Opera
Kaybo & Faisel Khalifa

A woman trying to book an appointment with her GP gets caught in an exasperating conversation with an AI chatbot. Later, she is surprised to receive a call:

– *Yes, I think I have to book appointment with a human GP doctor. Those humans are… too stressful!*

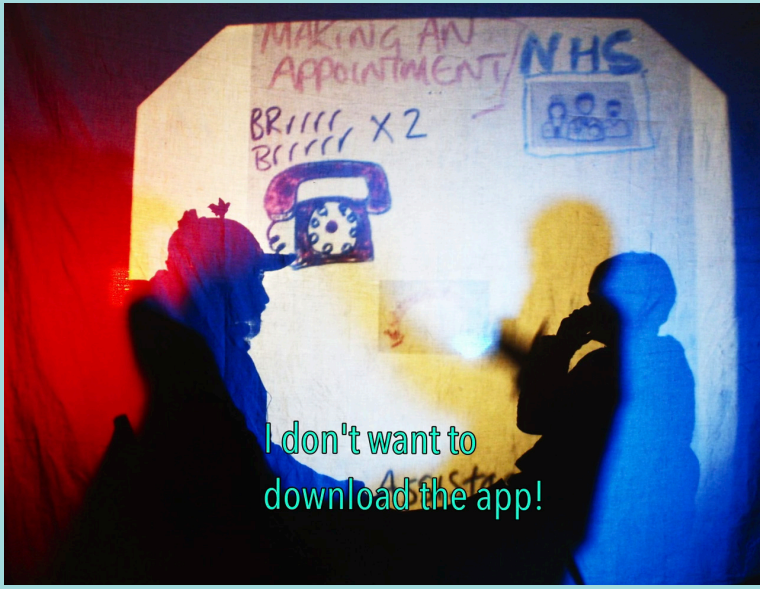
– *What!!? You need an appointment? With the GP? You? An AI? Why? Because you're too stressed?*

– *Yes.*

– *Oh. Well... good luck on that, then. I hope you get through!*

I find E-consultation stressful, to be honest. And if you want to cancel, you can't get another appointment because you can't talk to anyone.

Maybe we need learn to deal with AI like we would with a difficult person, someone who doesn't think or act the same as you.



It would be nice to have a choice – would you like to speak to the automated chatbot, or would you like to speak to a human?

Themes

To access many primary care services, you often need to use an online interface or talk to a chatbot. Should AI chatbots be used as gatekeepers in this way? When you're trying to reach a health professional, it's often because you're in pain or distress. Wouldn't an empathetic, experienced human be a more suitable conversational partner in such a situation?

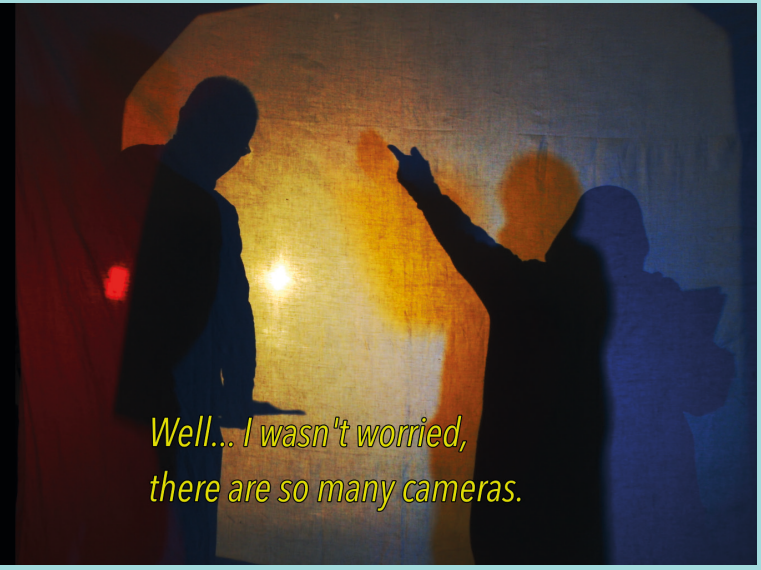
The World Is My Oyster... Card
Hasina Choudhury with Eggers

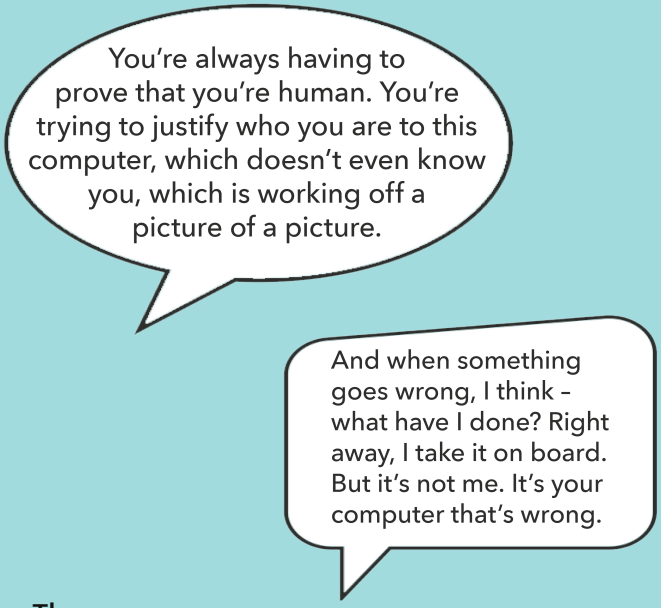
Some time in the future, two people are on an empty tube carriage, 3 AM. Going around the network, unable to get off because the AI doors don't recognise their Oyster cards.

– Yeah, I got some toast from the platform kiosk, and used my Oyster card to cut it into two slices. And then I got on, and haven't been able to get off... Nuts!

– Gosh, you'd think the facial recognition in the carriage doors would work and let you off!

– Yeah, more cuts in this public service,... Apparently they threw the kill switch months ago, Cost savings, they said...





Themes

AI systems are marketed as being more efficient and reliable than older technologies – but their complexity can also make them more vulnerable, and much harder to work around when they break down.

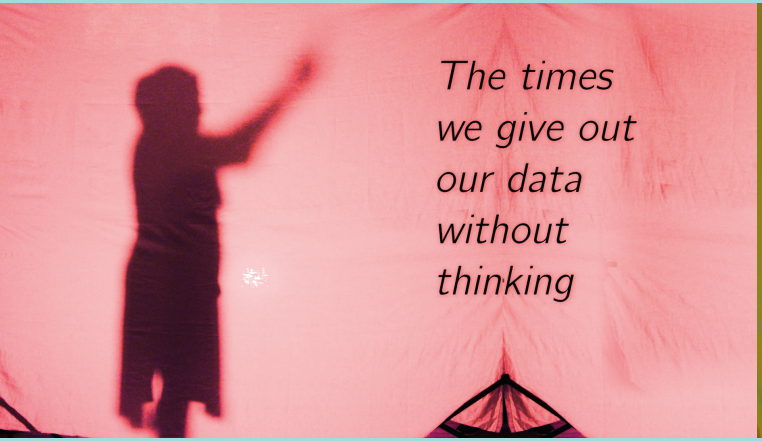
Sophisticated computer vision systems like those used in self-driving cars can be easily fooled. In San Francisco, people protesting the use of self-driving robotaxis in the city figured out that placing a traffic cone on the bonnet of the car disabled it completely. Some of the protestors objected to the use of city streets by tech corporations as a testing space for unfinished technologies (there have been several fatal accidents involving self-driving cars). Others were challenging the continued development of private cars as a solution to the problem of moving people around a city – a problem that could be solved by developing a better public transit system.

It All Began With 'I'
Ambia Bibi & Sarah Kasule

A movement piece based on
the poem *I/We* by Ambia Bibi
with beats by Sarah Kasule.

I/We

So it all began with an 'I'
iPhone iPad iPod
But then I realised
It wasn't 'I' but 'We'



We are watching you
We are controlling you
We know all about you…

Instagram Facebook Snapchat LinkedIn
YouTube Twitter and more…

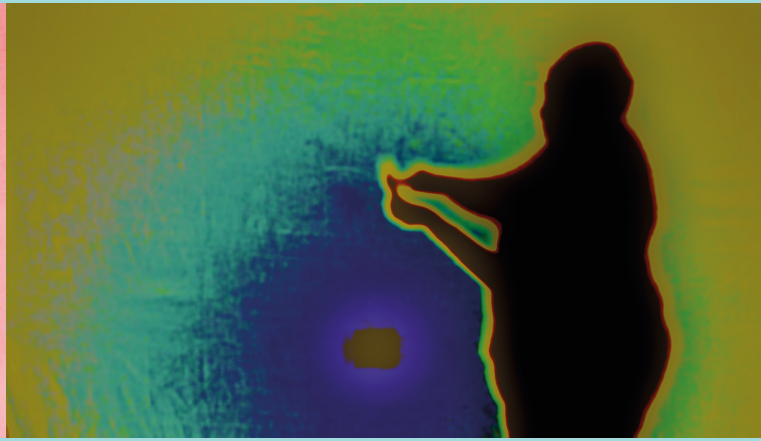
And it doesn't end there
as each day, there's a new app
to press and download
a new thread to follow

How do I *not* consent? Where do I do that?

We track your steps, your likes, your scrolls
We store your secrets,
your highs! your lows!
With every tap, we know your needs
We plant the seeds for your
words and deeds
From trending hashtags to tailored feeds
We shape the world around your needs

But… who is 'We' behind the screen?
What's the cost of all we see?

The more you give, the more we know
In this endless cycle we grow



It all began with 'I'
With a simple device
But now it's 'We'
and there's a price!

So think for a moment
Take a breath and ask…
Who is really behind it all?

Wherever you go, whatever you want to do, you've got to download the app. But I don't want to download it! I feel like I'm being railroaded…

Alone, Together
Andrew M & Sharheena Begum

Two strangers sitting at a park bench discover that they're watching the same show on their mobile phones. Happy to have been brought together by their devices, they decide to go to the cinema. But as they plan their journey using their own navigation apps, they discover that they're being recommended different routes to the same destination.



Themes

What does it mean to be treated fairly by an AI? Does it mean being treated identically? When should different users get different answers from an AI?

A navigation app must guide many people attempting the same journey simultaneously. If everyone took the same route, then the increased traffic might make all their journeys slower. So the app might recommend different routes to different people – which might not be the most optimal or convenient for each person. In this case, showing different people different information might be justifiable. But what if an AI system displayed different prices to different people for the same thing? Or showed them different job ads, depending on their postcode or gender?



My Friend
Hasina Choudhury with Eggers

A busy mother sees her digital assistant Alexa as a companion and helpul source of recipes. But soon, Alexa becomes a liability as it turns on speakers all over the house when asked to play music. Dashing between rooms to switch them off, the mother ends up burning her children's dinner. But she forgives the assistant, which is after all just learning...

Themes

Where does a digital assistant get its information from? Who's responsible if the information is inaccurate? Could a digital assistant be a good conversation partner as well as a reliable source of information? Could it replace a human as a therapist?

– Mom, why are you so nice to Alexa? It's not a person!

– If I'm horrible to someone, it'll have a bad impact on me. Same if I'm horrible to a little bird. So why not use our manners with machines? Alexa is always listening so well... In a way, I'm teaching her good manners. She greets, she apologises, she knows which songs I like, which food I like... She is reliable. Always ready.

– Mom, look, this bill is humongous! All these subscriptions for music, cooking shows… Do you always agree to Alexa's suggestions?





Method: *Codesign Sprint*

At the end of the workshops, participants were invited to a codesign sprint led by The People Speak to review this booklet and highlight possible next steps (e.g., a course on AI-literacy). Together, we identified target audiences (beyond AI researchers and community groups) who might benefit from the methods and outcomes; these included school and youth services, consumer activists and watchdogs, managers of health and social care provision, and new arrivals to the UK.

Participants concurred that the most urgent issues in AI were knowing when it was involved in some decision or management process, and having the possibility of an explanation, redress, or non-AI alternatives as appropriate. One participant suggested labelling AI-managed systems and AI-generated content using a declaration similar to the nutritional information found on packaged food. This could begin as a citizen action, building up to a campaign for statutory regulation. Another participant urged the community to remember that 'one size AI doesn't fit all, it doesn't include the exception'.



Image: Eggers

About Us

Manu Luksch researches the effects of emerging technologies on daily life, social relations, urban space, and political structures through her films and art works. Her current focus is on corporate-governmental relationships and the social effects of predictive analytics in the algorithmic city. She has been Senior Research Associate at London's RCA, Artist in Residence at Birkbeck's School of Law, Roberta Denning Visiting Artist at Stanford University, and an Open Society Fellow. Her work is included in the Collection de Centre Pompidou, the BFI National Archive, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences. Luksch is founding member of Ambient Information Systems, an enduring collaboration with Mukul Patel.

Mukul Patel develops intermedia works, environments and processes informed by 25 years of critical engagement with network cultures, technology and art, and an academic background spanning the humanities, sciences and mathematics (Cambridge, Imperial). Current foci include the democratic possibilities afforded by open-access, metadata-rich archives (in part with IWM, Vienna), and an interrogation of unfettered AI-utopianism (at RCA, London). His extensive catalogue of sonic works for installation, film and dance includes collaborations with Ryuichi Sakamoto, Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Lyon, Bayerisches Staatsballet, Shobana Jeyasingh and Isaac Julien. Patel's writing ranges from analytic papers on social and technological infrastructures and an acclaimed children's book on mathematics to film scripts voiced by Tilda Swinton.

The People Speak are a group of international artists, cultural producers and science communicators based in East London. We have 28 years' expertise in helping people to understand each other and collectively process the complexity of the world. Our interactive participatory formats are rooted in mass media formats - talk shows, game shows, reality shows, etc. We articulate collective imagination, inform public decision-making and deepen connections between diverse groups of people in a fun way. Our collaborators include most national cultural institutions: – British Council, Royal Opera House, Tate Galleries, National Theatre, Southbank Centre, Science Museum, V&A; universities – University College, Goldsmiths, Imperial College, Queen Mary University, Kings College – University of London, University of the Arts London, the Francis Crick Institute; many UK festivals, social and youth charities, and most London boroughs. *www.thepeoplespeak.org.uk*

Represented for this project by:

Mikey Weinkove
Co-founder of The People Speak
and inventor of *Talkaoke*

Margot Przymierska
Performer, writer, producer and facilitator
www.przymierska.com

Jack Michael Carr
Theatre-maker and curator, recent graduate from Wimbledon College of Arts
instagram *@jack_michael_carr*

Credits

Booklet Text Mukul Patel

Design Ambient Information Systems

Workshop Participants Jubier Ahmed, Siddiqua Ahmed, Nailah Ali, Sherene Ali, Kayuma Begum, Sharheena Begum, Ambia Bibi, Hasina Choudhury, Eggers, Daniella Gambardella, Arafat Islam, Kaybo, Sarah Kasule, Faisel Khalifa, Andrew M, Azeem Miah, Runu Miah, Mannaan Saadut, Sophie Stardust, and others who wish to remain anonymous.

With thanks to all at PVAI, Streets of Growth, and Mind in Tower Hamlets, Newham & Redbridge.

For more on the methods described here
contact@ambienttv.net
info@thepeoplespeak.org.uk

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Made possible by a Public Voices in AI grant funded through Responsible AI UK (grant reference EP/Y009800/1).

AMBIENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

THE PEOPLE SPEAK





mind Tower Hamlets, Newham and Redbridge

