Gut-check: the Boston UX community and the current tech backlash

Julian Gautier, Derek Murphy, Tania Schlatter
Institute for Quantitative Social Science, Harvard University
Introduction

Informal survey – questionnaire via Google Forms

Are ethical concerns on the minds of Boston area UX practitioners? If so, how they might affect practitioners’ work?

Participants recruited via:

- Slack
- Twitter
- UXPA enewsletter
- Personal appeals to Boston-area UX friends
Responses

69 Responses, 4 categories

- Demographic information
- Concerns
- Influence
- Outcomes
Demographics: In what industry/sector have you practiced UX within the past five years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry/sector</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business High Tech Services &amp; Software</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare &amp; Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer High Tech Services &amp; Software</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance &amp; Financial Services</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising &amp; Marketing</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Support &amp; Logistics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel / Leisure / Hospitality</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Goods (Brands)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video &amp; Mobile Gaming</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23 industries/sectors, 17 taken from a UserTesting report, 6 “others”
Demographics: What is your primary professional role?

- **Design/UX**: 29 (42.0%)
- **Research**: 10 (14.5%)
- **Design/UX management**: 16 (23.2%)
- **Product management**: ~
- **Front-end development**: ~
- **UI design**: ~
- **Other**: ~

^8-15 roles, 6 taken from a UserTesting report
Demographics: Which best describes your work situation?

- My clients are employed by the company I work for (in-house): 41
- My clients are outside of the company I work for (out of house): 13
- I am an independent consultant/freelancer: 10
- I am not currently employed: 2
- I am a student: 1
- I have worked both in-house and as a consultant: 1
- My UX department serves both in-house and out of house clients: 1
Demographics: How many years have you practiced UX?
Demographics: Industry/sector (top 5) and years of practice

- Business High Tech Services & Software
- Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals
- Consumer High Tech Services & Software
- Education
- Finance & Financial Services

- Less than a year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- Over 10 years
Demographics: Industry/sector (top 5) and role (top 5)
Concerns: How do you feel about the potential for digital technology products to be addictive, misleading, coercive, or otherwise harmful?

- Very concerned: 27
- Concerned: 25
- A little concerned: 15
- Not concerned: 2
Concerns: Please select any of the following concerns you've had about digital technology products you've worked on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential to misinform</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential to breach users’ privacy</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential to distract users or demand their attention</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for discrimination</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential to enable/empower harassment</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potentially coercive</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potentially addictive</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for harmful civic/political impact</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for negative influence on children</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential to misrepresent paid content as editorial content</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these are a concern for me</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Concerns: Industry/sector (top 5) and concern level
**Influence:** Do respondents think they have the influence to change a potentially harmful UX decision?

- **I have some of the required influence:** 9 (13.0%)
- **I have the required influence:** 10 (14.5%)
- **I do not feel able to influence in this way:** 50 (72.5%)
Influence: How does influence vary by seniority?

Less than a year: 7
1-5 years: 21
6-10 years: 5
Over 10 years: 36

- **Yellow**: I have the required influence.
- **Blue**: I have some of the required influence.
- **Red**: I do not feel able to influence in this way.
Experience: Have respondents ever encountered a potentially harmful UX decision at work?

- Yes: 24 (34.8%)
- No: 24 (34.8%)
- Somewhat: 21 (30.4%)
Experience: How have respondents used their influence to address ethical concerns at work?

- Gathered research to influence the direction of a feature: 35%
- Raised the concerns to my team: 35%
- Suggested re-wording: 33%
- Conducted usability testing: 29%
- Suggested a change in affordance or UI element: 29%
- Raised the concerns to a stakeholder or client: 28%
- Raised the concerns to a higher-up in my organization: 24%
- Sought advice from a colleague: 22%
- Changed jobs: 7%
- Did not know how to or whether to act on concerns: 4%
Experience: Were respondents able to stop harmful decisions from happening?

- Yes: 5 (16.1%)
- Somewhat: 10 (32.3%)
- No: 16 (51.6%)

“I found other members in the team had similar concerns and we worked together to come up with an alternative solution that did not lead to harm for the user.”

“In some instances it worked but in others it didn't as the product management made the final decision despite raising the concerns.”

“They went ahead anyway. As a last resort, I asked to be transferred off the team/product.”
Thank you!

Email Derek if you’d like access to the data:
dlmurphy@g.harvard.edu