

Imaginary Friends for Unfriendly Imaginaries

User Personas, Research Personas, and Technical Persons as Methods of Sociotechnical Investigation and Influence

Shahpour (Sasha) Akhavi

Ph.D. student, York University Graduate Program in Science & Technology Studies

Abstract

Research personas designates a communication studies methodology for the study of algorithmically-influenced human behaviour, and it also designates a species of fictional character through which this methodology works. Personas themselves are elaborately / ritualistically made-up individuals with human or human-like names, faces, back-stories, likes, dislikes, and so on, all of which exist as data only. Posing as such an individual in a social media space, researchers can observe how such a space acts upon ordinary human users.

Such personas thus occupy a new space in an established pantheon of other “imaginary friends,” including bots, gods, sex robots, and others, whose imaginers seek through them to multiply some aspect of their own agency with respect to their sociotechnical world. Their particularly comparable elder siblings are *user personas*, through which software designers imagine typical users and their experiences being served and frustrated by their software. Each type in this pantheon has specific strengths and limitations (some of each of which are shared and some idiosyncratic) in respect of their type of employment and of the resistances that are offered by other aspects of the assemblage in which they operate. Further, each succeeds and fails in its mission based in part on the mix of imposition and investigation with which it is deployed.

This work draws on experience employing a research persona to investigate the spread of misinformation on TikTok and YouTube, as well as experience employing user personas in software design at multiple Toronto companies, to locate research personas in the pantheon of useful imaginary friends. It follows one persona of each type as it is conceived, instantiated in its respective space, disciplined / refined, acted upon, and observed by those who imagine it. The two types of entities emerge as particular foils to each other and as general comparators to other types. By this means, the paper theorizes insights about the broader enterprise of multiplying human agency via imaginary friends and the applicability of that enterprise to investigatory and political efforts.

Communication and Media Theory; ICTs, Big Data and Society; New and Emerging Media Technologies; Social Media and Society