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THEORIZING TOGGLING: MOVING AND BEING PUSHED BY UI

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What is toggling?

In this paper, I briefly recount the evolution in the use of the word ‘toggle,’ and build off it to theorize it as a concept. Today we know toggling as a verb, and the user interaction (UI) of switching between and moving across apps and activities. Prior to this, toggle was a noun that referred to fasteners on garments and on walls that held things in place (Lalvani and Doyuran 2024). This evolution from a noun to a verb, helps attend to the fact that as people, we have always used our hands, heads, and objects to hold things together, as we switch between doing and being.

To theorize toggling, I will first detail my motivation, methods, and methodology. Then I will illustrate how toggling as a concept, enables reframing two dominant views on (1) how information is imagined to *push* users to *do* things and (2) how *being* a user, especially a consumer, is imagined to *move* us “out of touch.” Reframing doing and being in this way allows scholars to examine how people *compose* their experiences (Dourish 2021) of switching across interfaces to buy, work, sell, and have fun.

Motivation, methods, and methodology

My interest in theorizing toggling stemmed from my pre-doctoral research with platform-based food delivery workers in Mumbai. I noticed how some gig workers often ordered lunch via the consumer app while still being logged in as workers on the worker-app. Some delivery workers I met had started or aspired to start their own cloud kitchens and would be switching between their restaurant partner interface and delivery worker interface.

My doctoral research built off this insight and involved a year of remote fieldwork to examine how Swiggy and Zomato aggregated users through promotions. I conducted a year-long digital ethnography of Swiggy and Zomato’s relationship building using the interface of their apps. I noticed how collected push notifications (PNs) guided me even when I was outside the app. I collected and inductively coded over 1,100 PNs sent to me over one calendar year and got interested in how platforms expand by pushing information and users. Then through in-person fieldwork in Mumbai, I examined how

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users — consumers buying food and businesses selling food — interacted and experienced aggregation. I met over 50 consumer and business users which included semi-structured interviews conducted in households, a 9-month immersion in a co-working space, and attending industry events.

Adopting a ‘fun’ methodology (Shapiro and Anjaria 2020) of remaining ‘on the surface,’ enables being open to people’s movement, beyond what infrastructures do (Shapiro 2020a). Staying on platform surfaces, I attended to *toggling* by meeting consumer-users as they composed their experiences of being household members, workers (at the co-working space), and people with civic commitments, not only recipients of services.

Pushing and pulling information

Information push has been understood largely through a dataveillance perspective that has shown how companies use people’s tastes, preferences, and habits as a resource and shape these. Be it through targeted advertising (Andrejevic 2013), recommendations and personalisation technologies that create filter bubbles (Pariser 2012). The scant literature on PNs has studied them in terms of their being a continuous loop of call and response (Markham 2020) inviting engagement to click, glance, and (Pielot and Rello 2017; Sanfillipo and Lev-Artez 2017) buy things that they do not need. Through my collection of PNs, I found that they pushed information in temporally sensitive, attentive, flirty, friendly, informal ways, yet most consumers I met, had turned off PNs.

If information can simply push us into doing things, how did my interlocutors find it too pushy? By meeting consumers as they toggled between work-home, relied on cooks, I was able to view UI with information push in that context, not just as a response to stimuli.

Can UI make us “out of touch?”

A dataveillance view on information’s capacity to push, is assumed to *move us* “out of touch,” this is evident in how platform scholars think about convenience and consumers. Even though scholars acknowledge how platform services, especially after the pandemic, are becoming infrastructural (Neves and Steinberg 2020), convenience is imagined to be a discourse that tempts users (Huberman 2021) and creates unconscious consumption (Hill 2020).

Prior to digital information push, push buttons in electric circuits on doorbells and typewriters, created similar concerns about users becoming lazy and disconnected. The making of people as button pushers, was feared to put the user out of touch with the realities of the work in providing convenience. In contemporary times, as “digital commanders,” we push flattened buttons on touch screens by tapping, and swiping (Plotnick 2017) and continue to worry about how this is making us insensitive.

Toggling as a conceptual vessel places UI in this history of how our hands and fingers have interacted with surfaces of objects like buttons and made sense of the world. Placing interaction in our hands makes room for us as scholars to ask: how do people make sense of information and *hold everything together as they switch between doing*

livelihood-care and *being* workers, consumers, business owners, householders and so on?

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