#didntreadthetandcs: Physical Interventions for Digital Privacy Awareness

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Work-in-Progress | Exhibition opens 6 November 2025

The Problem (That Everyone Has)

What if we stopped trying to make terms of service 'readable' and started making them *feelable*?

Here's the thing: simplification doesn't work. Research shows no measurable difference in user understanding between original and simplified terms (Robinson and Zhu, 2020). Yet we keep clicking 'I agree' on documents that would take over 250 hours annually to read (Obar, 2022), signing away fundamental rights without comprehension.

This isn't harmless behaviour. When we blindly accept terms of service, we trade away personal data in a global market worth $250 billion, where our information accounts for 36% of all direct data sales (Transparency Market Research, 2017). We grant companies extensive rights to collect, analyse, and share our location data, contact lists and behavioural patterns (Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). This creates power imbalances between users and technology platforms, undermining our ability to make truly informed choices about our digital lives.

I'm proposing a shift: instead of making privacy policies easier to read, let's make them impossible to ignore through physical data experiences that live in public spaces, not on screens.

Testing the Concept: From High-Fives to Behaviour Change

I've been testing whether playful interventions can make abstract privacy issues tangible without making people feel rubbish about their behaviour (because let's face it, everyone does the automatic clicking thing).

The High-Five Experiment: At a recent event, I buried a clause in a photography waiver saying, 'you owe me a high five'. The waiver was short enough to realistically read. Not one person out of 28 spotted it.

But here's what was interesting: when I revealed this during my presentation, instead of people being embarrassed, they were fascinated. They crowded around afterwards, sharing their own stories about what they'd accidentally agreed to.

The WIP Exhibition: I then developed this into a small-scale exhibition where visitors encountered the high-five experiment alongside other physical data installations about terms of service. The exhibition included live data displays showing how many people had signed the waiver versus how many high-fives I'd received, printed terms of service, and interactive elements that made the abstract concrete.

The Impact: After attending the WIP show, several visitors posted on LinkedIn about how the experience changed their behaviour. People commented that they now actually pay attention to terms of service before clicking 'I agree'—something years of simplified privacy policies and dire warnings had failed to achieve.

This validates my central thesis: playful interventions create awareness without shame, opening space for genuine conversation about digital rights. More importantly, they seem to genuinely change behaviour.

What I'm Building (Right Now)

I'm developing a pop-up exhibition opening 6 November 2025 featuring five to eight physical installations. Each installation transforms abstract privacy data into something you can see, touch, or interact with. I'm using everyday materials—cardboard, phones, stickers, vinyl lettering—to democratise access and reinforce that privacy affects everyone, not just tech experts.

Current installations in development

include:

- **Human bar charts** where visitors' bodies become the data visualisation
- **Sticker charts** for collective opinion-gathering on privacy ethics
- **Physical manifestations** of unreadable terms (like printing the entire 578-page Apple iOS terms of service)
- **Live data displays** showing real-time agreement behaviour
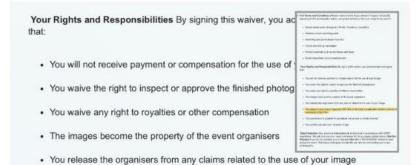- **Highlighted 'gotcha' clauses** from everyday services we all use

The exhibition is designed around the hashtag **#didntreadthetandcs** and positions itself as a conversation starter, not a finger-wagging exercise.

The Contribution (And Why It Matters For VIS)

This work challenges several assumptions in our field:

- That successful data communication happens primarily through screens
- That public engagement requires simplified, not embodied, experiences
- That data visualisation's primary audience should be fellow experts rather than affected communities

- That privacy is an individual rather than collective concern requiring collective response

Your Rights and Responsibilities By signing this waiver, you ac
that:

- You will not receive payment or compensation for the use of
- You waive the right to inspect or approve the finished photog
- You waive any right to royalties or other compensation
- The images become the property of the event organisers
- You release the organisers from any claims related to the use of your image
- You agree to give Sophie Sparkes (MA Design for Data Visualisation student present at the event) a high-five
- This permission is granted for perpetual use across all media formats
- You confirm you are over 18 years of age

The photography waiver with the high-five clause (highlighted in yellow). 28 people signed it. Not one person spotted the clause.
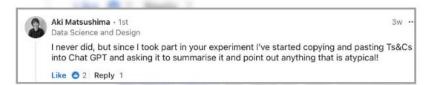

The work-in-progress show where visitors encountered the high-five experiment alongside other data installations from masters students in UAL's Design for Data Visualisation course.

Turns out making privacy tangible works better than making it readable.

Aki Matsushima · 1st
Data Science and Design

I never did, but since I took part in your experiment I've started copying and pasting Ts&Cs into Chat GPT and asking it to summarise it and point out anything that is atypical!

Like ⚪ 2 Reply 1

LinkedIn response from an attendee who said the exhibition changed their behaviour.

Other attendees told me in-person that they would actually read terms of service for the first time after experiencing the playful intervention.

The methodological questions I'm wrestling with involve how we evaluate participatory data visualisation beyond engagement metrics, how we design reproducible experiences that don't rely on a charismatic facilitator, and how we bridge the gap between 'that was interesting' and 'I will actually change my behaviour'.

The privacy policy crisis affects everyone who clicks 'I agree'. Shouldn't our solutions be equally accessible?

References

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Discussion Questions:

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1. Measuring Impact Beyond Engagement

Participatory and physical data visualisations (like sticker charts and human bar charts) clearly increase engagement and spark conversation. Early evidence suggests they may even change behaviour—visitors to my WIP show reported *actually* reading terms of service afterwards. But how might we rigorously measure their effectiveness in changing understanding or behaviour around complex issues like data privacy? What metrics or methods would you use to evaluate whether someone genuinely understands privacy implications better after participating, versus simply enjoying the experience?

2. The Personality Problem: Scaling Participatory Exhibits

This exhibition currently relies on my presence as facilitator and explainer—I'm the one revealing the high-five clause, asking for the high-fives, and guiding the conversation. For participatory data visualisation to move beyond one-off installations, how might we design these experiences to be reproducible by others whilst maintaining their impact? What design principles or documentation approaches could help uncouple the intervention from the original creator?

3. Beyond Simplification: Alternative Approaches to 'Unreadable' Data

Research shows that simplifying terms of service doesn't significantly increase comprehension or reading rates. My work suggests that making the implications tangible (rather than the documents readable) might be more effective. What role can experiential and participatory visualisation play in addressing situations where traditional simplification has failed? When should we focus on making the *implications* tangible rather than the *information* understandable?

4. From Awareness to Action

Participatory data visualisation excels at raising awareness and creating emotional connection to data. My LinkedIn responses suggest some visitors changed their behaviour after the exhibition. But how do we systematically bridge the gap between 'this is interesting, and I understand it better now' and 'I will consistently change my behaviour or advocate for change'? What design strategies might move participants from engagement to meaningful action on data privacy issues?