



Date:
1 June 2021

Project:
The ethics of
recommendation
engines in public-service
media

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for ethics of recommendation engines project

This Memorandum of Understanding ('MOU') is entered into by the Ada Lovelace Institute ('Ada'), part of the Nuffield Foundation, and the British Broadcasting Corporation ('BBC'). The purpose of this MOU is to set out the understanding between Ada and the BBC about certain key roles and responsibilities for the BBC's Research and Development (R&D) team to work with the Ada Lovelace Institute on a research project into the use and ethics of recommendation engines in public-service media. This MOU is not intended to be legally binding on the parties but it is intended to form the basis for negotiation of a consultancy agreement between Ada and the BBC.

About the project

In this project, the Ada Lovelace Institute aims to explore how public-service values can be operationalised and embedded in the development and deployment of recommendation systems and personalised content delivery systems, and what ethical and governance issues this might raise. Particularly, Ada seeks to disentangle the ethical issues arising from different methods of recommendations and different recommender goals, e.g. engagement versus diversity of content.

This project aims to evaluate what public-service values are, how they apply to the development of recommendation engines, and what kinds of ethical considerations may arise in using these technologies to serve public service ends. By undertaking a literature review and undertaking qualitative interviews with the BBC, other national public broadcasters, academics and developers, Ada hopes to develop potential governance and mitigation strategies that could minimise ethical risks while maximising social benefit, and to highlight future research questions to be explored in this area.

Proposed research project activities

The project will consist of four parts:

- A literature review and series of qualitative interviews with BBC staff, academics other public-service broadcasters, mapping the existing work around the ethical challenges that come with recommendation engines, the design approaches that feed into these tools, and the foundations of public-service broadcasting requirements.
- A series of interviews with developers of recommendation engines, BBC R&D staff, and other public-service broadcasters to understand the scenarios where public-service media may want to implement recommendation engines, the technical details of those interventions, and what challenges, benefits, and mitigations organisations might take in this space.
- A final report to be published on the Ada Lovelace Institute website and include:
 - a literature review of the ethics of recommendation systems and public-service broadcasting criteria
 - a description of the BBC and other public-service broadcaster applications of recommendation engines
 - an analysis of the benefits, risks and mitigations of these systems
 - considerations for future research.
- A final publication event with BBC, research team and advisory group speakers to present findings.

The Ada team may also write or commission blog posts, undertake public events on related topics and provide private briefings to public-service media, regulators and other interested parties in the interest of advancing the aims of this project.

The project will begin on 1 June 2021 and the final report will be completed on or before 31 December 2021. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) have provided Ada with a £100,000 grant for this project.

Purpose and scope of the Memorandum of Understanding

The research team will consist of one Ada researcher, Ada's Head of Research Partnerships, an external ethics consultant, an external project advisor, the technical consultants, provided by the BBC and a BBC Producer to coordinate.

The role of BBC R&D staff members assigned to this project will primarily be to provide technical and industry expertise. This will involve advising the rest of the research team on how public-service media recommendation systems are developed in practice, on existing technical approaches to recommendation engines and on current processes setting optimisation goals and operationalising values.

Expectations of the BBC

The tasks involved in providing this expertise will include:

- Meeting with the Ada research team on a fortnightly basis to discuss research strategy, objectives, and outputs.
- Identifying interview subjects and arranging interviews with BBC staff working on recommendation engines and public-service broadcast values.
- Sitting down for one-on-one or group interviews (as appropriate) on the research on recommendation system approaches in general and the implementation of recommendation systems within the BBC in particular.
- Where possible, providing relevant documentation on the design and implementation of recommendation systems within the BBC where appropriate to supplement interviews with staff and prior work commissioned by or produced with the BBC on recommendation systems to contribute to the Ada Lovelace Institute's literature review.
- Co-designing interview questions for other public-service media institutions and developers.
- Contributing to technical sections of the final report on how these systems are designed and managed.
- Providing peer review on other sections of the final report.
- Collaborating with the Ada Lovelace Institute in organising public event or events alongside the publication of the final report to share and discuss the findings and recommendations of the

project. This will include assisting in determining a venue, where necessary; assisting in the selection and invitation of speakers; and inviting attendees and sharing the event in relevant networks.

Activities will begin on 1 June 2021 and continue until 28 February 2022.