



Tutorial: User Simulation for Evaluating Information Access Systems

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of various information access systems exhibiting increasing complexity, there is a critical need for sound and scalable means of automatic evaluation. To address this challenge, user simulation emerges as a promising solution. This half-day tutorial focuses on providing a thorough understanding of user simulation techniques designed specifically for evaluation purposes. We systematically review major research progress, covering both general frameworks for designing user simulators, and specific models and algorithms for simulating user interactions with search engines, recommender systems, and conversational assistants. We also highlight some important future research directions.

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1 MOTIVATION

Although information access systems, such as search engines, recommender systems, and conversational assistants, are used by millions on a daily basis, how to appropriately evaluate those systems remains an open scientific challenge. It is especially challenging to evaluate a system's overall effectiveness in helping a user finish a task via interactive support. The fact that users vary significantly in terms of their behavior and preferences makes evaluation even more difficult. There are three widely-used evaluation methodologies for information access systems: reusable test collections [66], user studies [38], and online evaluation [32]. However, none of these methodologies can be used to compare multiple interactive information access systems (in terms of their overall effectiveness in supporting users) using reproducible experiments due to the static nature of the test collection-based approach and the lack of reproducibility when real users are involved.

User simulation has the potential to enable repeatable and reproducible evaluations at a low cost, without using invaluable user time (human assessor time or online experimentation bandwidth).

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Further, simulation can augment traditional evaluation methodologies by offering possibilities to gain insights into how system performance changes under different conditions and user behavior. Relevant research work, however, has been scattered in multiple research communities, including information retrieval, recommender systems, dialogue systems, and user modeling. This tutorial is a first synthesis of this extensive body of research into a coherent framework.

2 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this tutorial is to provide a systematic overview of research progress in user simulation from the perspective of evaluating information access systems. We will synthesize scattered research work from multiple research communities on this topic by using general theoretical frameworks, which would allow the participants to see how multiple lines of research are connected, the major high-level issues in user simulation, and the general idea of using simulation to evaluate information access systems. We will also systematically cover many specific simulation techniques, with a focus on those that may be employed to undertake evaluation of three major types of information access systems, specifically, search engines, recommender system, and conversational assistants, in order to (1) estimate how well they will perform under various circumstances, and (2) analyze how performance changes under different conditions and user behaviors. We will make our discussions as generic as possible so that those working on other types of interactive systems or applications of assistive AI would also find it useful.

Participants of the tutorial can expect to learn what user simulation is, why it is important to use user simulation for evaluation, how existing user simulation techniques can already be useful for evaluating interactive information retrieval systems, how to develop new user simulators, and how to use user simulation to evaluate almost any assistive AI system. They can also expect to learn why user simulation is very challenging and where additional research is still needed.

3 TARGET AUDIENCE AND PREREQUISITES

This introductory tutorial primarily targets graduate students, academic researchers, and industry practitioners working on information access or, more broadly, interactive AI systems. Since the question of how to accurately evaluate a search engine, a recommender system, or a conversational assistant is important to both practitioners who would like to assess the utility of their product systems and researchers who would like to know whether their new algorithms are truly more effective than the existing ones, we expect our tutorial to be broadly appealing to many participants

of CIKM. A general background in IR is sufficient. We expect that most CIKM participants would not have problems with following the material.

4 DURATION

The total duration of the tutorial is three hours (plus breaks).

5 SCOPE AND OUTLINE

The contents are organized into the following sections.

- **Introduction and Background** [20 min]

We first describe the spectrum of information access tasks. Next, we briefly discuss the goals of evaluation and general methodologies of evaluation (reusable test collections, user studies, and online evaluation). We then highlight the challenges involved in evaluating information access systems and how user simulation can help address those challenges.

- **Overview of User Simulation** [15 min]

This part provides a brief historical account on the use of simulation techniques, and highlight how various research communities focused on different but complementary areas of evaluation and user simulation. This includes early work on simulation in information retrieval [22, 30, 72] and studies in interactive information retrieval pointing out discrepancies between interactive and non-interactive evaluation results [31, 70, 75]. In dialogue systems research, simulation-based techniques have been used for dialogue policy learning [68, 79], and to a limited extent also for evaluation [27]. User simulation can be regarded as developing a complete and operational user model, which makes work on search tasks and intent [17, 49], information seeking models [26, 55], cognitive models of users [14, 33], and economic IR models [3, 4] highly relevant to us.

- **Simulation-based Evaluation Frameworks** [25 min]

We make the key observation that traditional evaluation measures used in IR may be viewed as naive user simulators, and discuss how to interpret Precision, Recall, and NDCG@k from an user simulation perspective [37, 83]. Next, we discuss metrics based on explicit models of user behavior, based on (1) the assumed user task, (2) the assumed user behavior when interacting with results, (3) the measurement of the reward a user would receive from examining a result, and (4) the measurement of the effort a user would need to make in order to receive the reward. Specifically, we cover the RBP [58], ERR [20], EBU [78], and the time-biased gain [71] measures, as well as the more general frameworks of C/W/L [7, 56], C/W/L/A [57], and the model-based framework by Carterette [18]. Finally, we present a general simulation-based evaluation framework [83] and the Interface Card Model [84], which can be used to evaluate an interactive information access system with a computationally generated dynamic browsing interface using user simulation.

- **User Simulation and Human Decision-making** [15 min]

In this part, we provide a high-level overview of research on conceptual models that can provide theoretical guidance for modeling processes and decisions from an individual's perspective. We cover models of search behavior within three main categories:

(1) *cognitive models*, focusing on the cognitive processes underlying the information-seeking activity [14, 33, 34], (2) *process models*, representing the different stages and activities during the search process [40, 48], and (3) *strategic models*, describing tactics that users employ when searching for information [13, 61, 62]. Then, we discuss how to model decision-making processes mathematically using Markov decision processes (MDP). The MDP framework provides a general formal framework for constructing user simulators, which we will use to discuss specific user simulation techniques in the next two sections.

- **Simulating Interactions with Search and Recommender Systems** [45 min]

We start by presenting models that describe interaction workflows, that is, specify the space of user actions and system responses, and possible transitions between them [12, 53, 54]. Then, we discuss specific user actions: query formulation [2, 5, 11, 19, 36, 42], scanning behavior [23, 24, 28], clicks [21, 28, 35, 85], effort involved in processing documents [19, 51, 71, 86], and stopping [50, 53, 54, 59, 77]. We also provide an overview of toolkits and resources [9, 52, 80] and discuss approaches to validating simulators [16, 41, 43].

- **Simulating Interactions with Conversational Assistants** [30 min]

We begin with a conceptualization of conversational information access in terms of intents [6, 64, 73] and dialogue structure [15, 47, 63, 63, 76, 81, 82], and discuss two fundamentally different simulator architectures: modular [1] and end-to-end systems [44, 74]. There is a solid body of work within dialogue systems research on simulating user decisions to build on, including the widely used agenda-based simulation [67] and more recent sequence-to-sequence models [25, 29, 39, 44, 45]. This is followed by the discussion of simulation approaches developed specifically for conversational information access [46, 60, 65, 69, 81, 82]. We review toolkits and resources [1, 15, 60, 65, 69], followed by a discussion on how simulators themselves can be evaluated [68, 81].

- **Conclusion and Future Challenges** [15 min]

We conclude by highlighting open issues and providing several potential research directions. We discuss how simulation technologies can help foster collaboration between academia and industry. We also argue that some of the major challenges that remain require research from multiple subject areas, including information science, information retrieval, recommender systems, machine learning, natural language processing, knowledge representation, human-computer interaction, and psychology, making user simulation a truly interdisciplinary area for research.

- **Discussion** [15 min]

We dedicate the last bit of the tutorial to open-ended discussion and feedback from participants.

6 SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The tutorial is based on a survey that is currently under review at Foundations and Trends in Information Retrieval; a preprint is available at [10]. There is a companion website to the survey, <https://usersim.ai>, which also hosts the slides for the tutorial.

7 RELATED TUTORIALS

We are not aware of any other tutorials dedicated to user simulation that have been given at information retrieval conferences or related conferences (SIGIR, CIKM WSDM, TheWebConf, etc.) except that our tutorial has recently been given at ACM CIKM 2023. The rationale for giving the same tutorial at ACM SIGIR-AP 2023 is that the audience that we reached at CIKM 2023 are different from the audience that we could reach at SIGIR-AP 2023.

Our tutorial is related to a few other tutorials in the Information Retrieval (IR) community and the Machine Learning community. The tutorial on Interactive IR (IIR) given by Zhai at SIGIR'20 and SIGIR'21 includes a brief discussion of the use of user simulation for evaluating IIR systems, but that tutorial only briefly covered the evaluation framework proposed in [83], how some basic evaluation measures can be interpreted in the framework, and how it could be used to evaluate a particular IIR system. Our tutorial covers a much broader scope of topics about user simulation and a more in-depth explanation and discussion of the evaluation framework. Another relevant tutorial is a CHIIR 2021 Tutorial on the C/W/L Evaluation Framework, covering User Models, Metrics and Measures of Search [8]. It also connects evaluation with user modeling as our tutorial does, but only covers the C/W/L evaluation framework and simulation of a user's scanning and clicking behavior. Our tutorial has a much broader coverage of many user simulation techniques and deeper discussion of the relation of simulation and evaluation.

A tutorial recently given at NeurIPS 2019 on Human Behavior Modeling with Machine Learning: Opportunities and Challenges¹ is related to our tutorial in that the ML techniques used for predicting and analyzing human behavior covered in that tutorial are related to the ML techniques used for simulating user behavior, but their tutorial is not about simulation of users.

8 PRESENTER

The tutorial will be presented by ChengXiang Zhai at ACM SIGIR-AP 2023, based on the materials prepared by Krisztian Balog and ChengXiang Zhai.

ChengXiang Zhai is a Donald Biggar Willett Professor in Engineering of Department of Computer Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include intelligent information retrieval, text mining, natural language processing, machine learning, and their applications. He serves as a Senior Associate Editor of ACM Transactions on Intelligent Systems and Technology and previously served as Associate Editors of ACM TOIS, ACM TKDD, and Elsevier's IPM, and Program Co-Chair of NAACL-HLT'07, SIGIR'09, and WWW'15. He is an ACM Fellow and a member of the ACM SIGIR Academy. He received the ACM SIGIR Gerard Salton Award and ACM SIGIR Test of Time Award (three times). He has previously given tutorials at HLT-NAACL'04, SIGIR'05, SIGIR'06, HLT-NAACL'07, ICTIR'13, SIGIR'14, KDD'17, SIGIR'17, SIGIR'18, SIGIR'20, and SIGIR'21.

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¹<https://neurips.cc/Conferences/2019/ScheduleMultitrack?event=13207>

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