Materialising activism through HCI research

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Introduction

Solidarity and commons organizations in Europe, in many cases operating under the umbrella of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) or of a new (digital) cooperative movement, are committed to building a more socially just society through a better configuration of democracy and economy. One of the key elements of their success, is the way that in very practical and creative ways materialise their own societal imaginaries in the form of democratically run and collectively owned (digital) cooperatives, self-organised and informal social clinics, or fair trade no-middlemen initiatives. Such examples of prefigurative social movements [2] have a lot in common (at least in terms of a shared value system and societal goals) with politically-motivated HCI research, while also offering HCI researchers very practical examples of socio-technical infrastructures able to transform (public or common) services.

In this position paper, through my more recent work with social movements and commons organisations, I briefly comment on: (i) PAR and design methods for engaging in such contexts through open source prototyping [5], tooling and visioning [3] and civic research spin-offs [4]; and (ii) current and ongoing technological agendas able to support the scaling out of such transformative practices.

PAR METHODS TO MATERIALISE ACTIVISM

In this section I briefly touch on a series of Participatory Action Research methods that I have been using throughout the work of Open Lab Athens the last three years, aiming at creating the conditions for such solidarity and commoning practices to scale out.

Open Source prototyping

Use already available open source tools and build on them to create prototypes to test with such commons organisations / social movements.

Justification / Goal:

- Use of tools that are produced by commoning practices and in many cases are left unused due to the lack of business models to support them
- Contribute to the open source code of these projects and give the opportunity to the community of developers to engage in such research projects
- Create connections between seemingly irrelevant movements – i.e. digital commons and open source communities with people using very similar organisational practices and with similar values but doing the same thing in smaller scale and neighbourhood level.
- Prototypes if successful can be taken forward by open source community or at least its much easier to maintain / sustain compared with bespoke systems developed for civic purposes in research

Example project:

Open eClass[1]: An adaptation of Open eClass system for use with solidarity schools in Athens as a way of supporting the needs of the structure, intervening in a context where tenchnology is not widely used in order to collect data about the role of tecnhnology for adversarial service provision and making the connections with local open source communities.

Open radio[2] [3]: Use a configuration of open source systems LibreTime and Icecast to provide a modern digital infrastructure for a self-organised e-radio group. The migration to the new systems from depricated ones currently is done is stages that reveal the relation of the group with existing technology and the social processes that have been formed around such infrastructure. Through this work we come up with design implications for the design of e-radio platforms run by self-organised groups.

Tooling up and visioning *[3]*

Spread tools and methods to facilitate co-design processes within such social movements, e.g. training non-experts on how to use participatory tools and teaching them research / analytical methods to come up with collective visions of possible futures informed by current practice/experience.

Justification / Goal:

- PD and infrastructuring methods can contribute in bringing people together to develop future visions
- Supporting the groups operations by training participants in technology use or creating non-existent socio-technical processes
- Contribute (design) methods for service design (towards the design of adversarial services)

[1] https://www.openeclass.org/

[2] https://libretime.org/

[3] https://icecast.org/

Example project: Through engagements with a self-organised social clinic and solidarity pharmacy in Athens the last three years, an internal group for oral history was created (by myself and other members) aiming at training volunteers in undertaking qualitative data collection (oral histories) and analysis. This work has been motivated by the need of the group to transform its services and structure and as a result our research and design expertise has been key in providing the methods and possible directions for the group. This work has contributed implications for both future visions of the group but also for a participatory and humane national health system. These implications also give us some preliminary insights about the design of socially just digital health infrastructures in times where automation and AI has been monopolising interest in these sectors.

Civic non-profit spin-off labs

Establish a (more) permanent technology and design research presence to contexts of socio-political innovation that allows for a closer and long term investigation of such movements and emerging participatory practices [5].

Justification / Goal:

- Bring additional resources (both material and financial) to a massively under-resourced SSE (through HCI research)
- Adapt PD methods in ways that serve both design research (e.g. the collection of data to design technologies and processes) and such contexts (e.g. commons festivals instead of consortium, coordination assemblies instead of workshops etc.
- Go beyond the common narrative and understand in-depth the implications of such self-organised practices
- Become the enabling actor for establishing synergies between informal structures, cooperative organisations (and the SSE more generally) and politically associated institutions.
- The university becoming the actor for creating the equivalent of company spin-offs but for social change – a civic university vision of creating non-for-profit spin-offs which through undertaking embedded and action-oriented research contribute to social change

Example project: Open Lab Athens[4] is a non-for-profit organisation, a spin-off from a research project of Newcastle University. It is a design initiative of researchers and practitioners who engage in spaces of social innovation. Acknowledging the politics and values embedded in any system and infrastructure, we conceive social and technical systems that sustain and reproduce practices of solidarity, horizontality, and radical democratic participation. Our research contributes to Computing, Social Movements, Design and Digital Civics research.

TARGET INFRASTRUCTURES

In this section I focus on already developed or emerging technical and design agendas resulting from the PAR and PD work briefly introduced above.

Socio-digital innovation

Designing digital technology that mirrors ways of doing from existing social innovations, for example organisational practices of social movements or time banking initiatives on the ground.

Justification / Goal:

[4] https://olathens.gr/

- Ethnographic and PAR methods complementing PD methods in designing (participatory) technologies that enable ways of doing that are not superficially apparent
- Embed values and practices of such movements within the systems that we design and build – instead of engaging in PD to design/develop technology targeted to the group and people we are working with
- Through embedding such values and practices in socio-technical systems, contribute to the scaling out of such systems in other areas

Example project: IrisMSG.io[5]: Iris SMS is a community SMS donation platform inspired by the Solidarity Economy. It allows sending SMS text messages to a list of subscribers through SMS donors. People supporting an organisation, group or cause can sign up to become 'donors' and donate a number of SMS messages for a cause (e.g. from an already purchased package of SMS messages per month). Everytime that a person (e.g. a coordinator) needs to send a text to a list of subscribers (e.g. volunteers, staff etc.) the cost of the text messages sent is shared between the donors. As a result, the communication of the organisation becomes more transparent and decentralised. Donors, through the Iris app, are able to see the content of the announcements sent, the subscription lists and sending and delivery reports.

Solidarity Economy Platforms

Designing sharing economy platforms able to enact/mediate meaningful sharing between its members – rather than an enactment of sharing as materialised by existing Sharing Economy platforms.

Justification / Goal:

- Make visible the diversity of sharing practices in the economy (e.g. caring practices, bartering, informal lending etc.) [1]
- Re-claim "sharing" and its meaning
- Create the digital technologies to support such meaningful sharing practices at scale

Example project: A Digital Civics PhD candidate Vasilis Ntouros has been doing work with a ride sharing group that operates on Facebook. This work has surfaced some preliminary insights about how the stages of search and discovery, trust and logistics of a sharing economy platform are manifested within a self-organised group on a Facebook page. The work raises interesting questions about the role of fluid and self-proclaimed identities on designing such solidarity economy platforms.

Generative commons platforms

Creating the legal and technological toolkits to facilitate the scaling out of commons.

Justification / Goal:

- We have reached a point of maturity for many open source projects in open repositories, many of which however require technical skills and/or self-hosting to work
- Provide the system administration tools to help reduce the technical overhead needed to set-up, configure and maintain such systems – recent software delivery packages like containers (e.g. Docker) and container-orchestration systems (e.g. Kubernetes) help towards that direction
- Contribute to already existing digital cooperatives making available and more accessible already existing open source tools – e.g. Framasoft, Etherpad etc.

[5] https://irismsg.io/

Example project: gE.CO Living Lab[6] is an exchange platform for formal groups or informal communities of citizens who manage fab-lab, hubs, incubators, co-creation spaces, social centres created in regenerated urban voids. The gE.CO toolbox[7] is a collection of software services that allow communities to take advantage of free to use technologies. These technologies are usually difficult to setup. With the toolbox, we'll handle the technical side, allowing you to get on with what's important to you. The toolbox is designed to be used by organisations in the commons. All of the software has been designed to help organisations carry out the tasks they currently struggle with.

Author biography

I am currently a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Human-Computer Interaction and Digital Civics at the School of Computing at Newcastle University, Open Lab. I am also the founder of Open Lab Athens.

My work centres on designing novel digital infrastructures for civic participation through place-based, participatory and action-led research aiming at the development of cooperative decision-making and service provision. As part of this research agenda, I am a Co-I of the H2020 "Generative European Commons Living Lab" (Ge.CO Living Lab) at Newcastle University, of the H2020 "Digital Disruptive Technologies to co-create, co-produce and co-manage Open Public Services" (CO3) project, of the EPSRC Digital Economy Research Centre and our newly awarded EPSRC Centre for Digital Citizens – Next Stage Digital Economy Centre.

Related papers

Vasillis Vlachokyriakos, et al. 2018. *Infrastructuring the Solidarity Economy: Unpacking Strategies and Tactics in Designing Social Innovation.* In Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '18).

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Clara Crivellaro, Vasilis Vlachokyriakos et al. 2019. Infrastructuring Public Service Transformation: Creating Collaborative Spaces between Communities and Institutions through HCI Research. ACM TOCHI.

Vasilis Vlachokyriakos, et al. 2014. PosterVote: expanding the action repertoire for local political activism. In Proceedings of the 2014 conference on Designing interactive systems (DIS '14).

Example technologies

IrisMSg SMS donation system (beta): https://irismsg.io/
PosterVote: https://postervote.openlab.ncl.ac.uk/
GeCo toolbox (beta): https://gecotoolbox.io/

Example projects

Open Lab Athens: https://olathens.gr/
H2020 GeCO project: https://generative-commons.eu/
H2020 Co3 project: http://www.projectco3.eu/

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