Participating in Embedded Research: Digital Civics and the Voluntary Sector

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Abstract

As HCI researchers expand the range of their work in voluntary and charity spaces, the field of enquiry for Digital Civics expands before it, and the concept of embedded research takes on a new relevance. In this position paper I therefore reflect both on my own work and the work of colleagues involved in the Digital Civics endeavor to discuss some of the key challenges to working in an embedded fashion, across time with voluntary or charity sector collaborators.

Author Keywords
Voluntary Sector; Participatory Design; Digital Civics.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction

Both the evident civic turn [2] and the turn to the local [4] within HCI have seen an increase in the design of technologies for the civic 'good' and marks a corresponding increase in HCI researcher engagement with a range of civic organisations. Voluntary organisations and charities are examples of sites of this increased activity [8], with researchers engaging with those delivering, and consuming, community based public service provision [1]. This can of course lead to the production of useful technologies as well as fostering relationships beneficial to the research community.

These relationships are negotiated around specific research methodologies with ethnography, action research and participatory design approaches being commonly employed by HCI researchers 'in-the-wild' [6]. As such they come to fruition across extended periods of time, so that it is now not uncommon to see entire PhD projects involving the development and

negotiation of such a relationship. Evolving the understanding of this kind of work, Segalowitz and Brereton posit the notion of embedded research to describe and highlight some of the challenges from working in this fashion, citing the disruption of a user's 'feelings' of involvement as well as issues relating to knowledge boundaries as barriers to successful project outcomes. Especially salient points when working with charitable or voluntary organisations engaging with a diverse range of people, whose everyday work can be difficult or challenging.

As researchers then, we have a duty both to our collaborating organisations, as well as to ourselves to reflect upon the implications entailed within this kind of work, ensuring that it is not undertaken lightly, or without significant forethought. Chief amongst these are our motivations for conducting work in these 'in-the-wild' spaces, and the responsibility we hold for sustaining outcomes beyond project time scales. Both important matters to consider as the field of Digital Civics expands.

Working 'In-the-wild'
A defining characteristic of charitable organisations is their embodying of specific social values and relationship to social issues that drives and directs their activities [3]. Equally they are beholden to systemic realities such as attracting sufficient resources to ensure continued operation, which creates tensions around how and why they engage with researchers in collaborative practices. Thus, instead of practice being driven by innovation for the social good, or values inherent in the organisations in the first place, it is instead driven by the need to continue to find resources through, for example, collaborating with researchers.

By the same token we must reflect on our own motivations for being involved with charitable organisations. HCI scholars have framed our involvement in such spaces as potentially suspect: A framing made all the more critical, "in light of the continuing expansion of digital networking in the context of prevailing neo-liberal market globalization forces and the publics organized against those forces."[5]. This is tantamount to a hidden agenda and is in tension with the values that organisations in this sector have.

This foregrounds the importance of transparency on both sides, both from an organisational perspective around how they see their values translated into practice as well as for the researcher in relation to their thoughts, feelings and intentions in their work. Doubtless, a dialogue would contribute to a shared understanding, clarifying expectations and intentions held by both parties and would have implications for research outcomes also.

Sustaining Relationships
HCI research also has rightly explored issues relating to how technologies are bridged and supported beyond project timescales [7]. However, less consideration has been given to what happens to the relationships built up with collaborators. What will the legacy be for academic institutions off resource on the one hand but then finding later that this support cannot continue? More thought needs to be given to how these legacies can be passed on or taken up by others going forward. Ideally, we would see a chain of research that flowed into the future, being passed on as the field expands. However, there are little guarantees of this kind of practice and no assurances in place for participating

organisations. At best this would mean an organization having the use of a useful technology until an update was required. At worst it would mean the withdrawal of valuable resources on which they may have come to depend. As such, consideration must be taken when drafting research proposals and clear and transparent communication between partners adopted as the norm from the outset. This may also include producing a realistic, and well thought out exit strategy as well.

Conclusions

In this position paper, I have reflected on two of the main challenges, as I see them, emerging from my own work as well as those around me for conducting research in charity and voluntary organisational spaces. This is by no means an exhaustive list, there are many more that space constraints require be explored in more detail elsewhere. However, what is clear is that if Digital Civics is to continue to expand apace and result in practical, helpful, innovative technologies for the civic 'good', it must continue to challenge itself, following self-reflective practices that ensure that it minimizes potentially damaging behavior, and fosters relationships beneficial to all parties involved.

Author Bio

Andy Dow is a PhD student in the Digital Civics Centre Doctoral Training at Newcastle University, UK. My PhD focuses on creating digital systems that capture the voice, opinions and experiences of people making use of care support services, as a means to provide data for service innovation. Employing Participatory Action Research methods: qualitative design practices and participatory design, I have an interest in co-producing technologies with community partners and consumers of support services.

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