Prefigurative Design as an Alternative Approach to Civic Engagement

Mariam Asad

Georgia Institute of Technology

85 5th St NW.

Atlanta, GA 30332 USA

missasad@gatech.edu

Abstract

This submission describes my participatory action research with activist and advocacy organizations in Atlanta. This research shows patterns across these groups' technology use and organizational practices and reveal assumptions on how digital tools mediate traditional modes of civic participation. Activist practices point to alternate sociopolitical values through which we might broaden understandings of digitally mediated civic engagement. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork and anarchist organizing literature, I suggest prefigurative design as a means to better leverage design in service of radical community work. Prefigurative design is a prompt to re-evaluate our professional and research practices and resources to better support progressive political efforts.

Author Keywords

Civic engagement; action research; design research; anarchism; activism.

ACM Classification Keywords

• Human-centered computing~Field studies   • Human-centered computing~Computer supported cooperative work   • Social and professional topics~Codes of ethics

Introduction

Radical activist work is a rich and valuable site for HCI-based civic engagement research. They use various digital tools in their work, though these typically corporate tools contradict activists' radically progressive values. This work acknowledges this tension and asks: *How can we design digital tools to imagine and contribute to radical political futures?* I offer *prefigurative design*: design work oriented in service of progressive political goals to both represent these goals as design objects, and also structure design processes to try to actualize these goals. This approach is directly informed by the envisioning processes of my community collaborators: if activists envision an equitable future, they adopt anti-oppressive mechanisms in the present to actively bring about—to prefigure—that equitable future. Prefigurative design prompts practitioners and researchers to both imagine alternative futures and to structure design processes to manifest them in the present. These practices are experimental and incomplete and iterative to negotiate and collaboratively build the relationships, processes, and structures on which these alternative futures will be modeled. This work builds on six years of ethnographic work with various issue-oriented communities working for progressive political change through both institutional and grassroots channels. Activist communities face similar challenges as traditional civic engagement actors (e.g. non-profit advocates, city/municipal employees, local representatives), though respond to them in vastly different ways.

This research makes three contributions: it interrogates the assumptions and expectations around technology design and use in progressive political work; it points to alternative values that existing research can learn from; and it points to opportunities to re-commit to our research collaborations to build more meaningful community partnerships and academic impact.

This colloquium is a good opportunity to discuss strategies with other community-based researchers strategies for navigating the added commitments we have to our research collaborators due to the interventionist approaches to our work. For example: how commitments to a site are negotiated and agreed upon with collaborators; how resources are leveraged (or lacking) to support community partners. It will be valuable to learn about constraints my peers face (and perhaps share), like identity concerns in homogenous spaces, political constraints around public work, and/or broader academic/non-academic power dynamics.

Background

My fieldwork in local Atlanta communities reveals common patterns across digitally mediated civic engagement: for example, advocates and activists might both use social media to broadcast news updates, for example, or use databases to manage volunteers. Though they may share operational practices, these actors use different political strategies: advocates tend to use mechanisms of representative democracy—such as bureaucratic delegation, legislative lobbying, or electoral voting—whereas activists use more confrontational tactics to drive more drastic and immediate change. My research is situated in this gap between the existing, ineffective mechanisms of sociopolitical change and alternative radical methods that might better serve Western democratic society.

Dominant Models of Civic Engagement
Literature points to how digital tools are deployed with the assumption they will enhance traditional mechanisms of civic engagement: for example, networked technologies offer larger venues for public discourse and decision-making (*e.g.* chatrooms, listservs, online petitions). Recent work complicates this narrative: digital tools are complex, nuanced intermediaries with their own agencies and politics. For instance, smart city technologies claim to use sensors and data to improve existing modes of governance. They appear neutral and promise more responsive and efficient city services, but obscure the growing privatization and commodification of public spaces and infrastructures.

These 'smart' interventions raise new concerns around civic processes, such as how data are validated and used, or who has the purchase and resources to participate. They do not, however, engage with underlying structures that impede or facilitate change, such as representative democracy, where constituents still need to rely on public officials and representatives to enact change. Maintaining existing modes of civic engagement point to what kinds of political change are valued. The technological affordances of these digital tools appear to offer more transparency and direct participation, while reinforcing dominant mechanisms of participation, e.g. rational public debate, utilitarian decision-making. They disallow seemingly less legitimate ways of participating, such as experiential knowledge, dissent and disagreement, or non-participation (*e.g.* boycotts). I am not interested in defining unambiguous binaries of what is or is not legitimate political participation, but instead to highlight

dominant, hegemonic civic and political models that are uncritically replicated and normalized.

Anarchism as Alternative Model
At best, these dominant practices of civic engagement continue to ignore long-standing and large scale sociopolitical concerns, such as unequal distribution of resources, historically disenfranchised neighborhoods, or systemic exclusion from services and opportunities; at worst, they reproduce and exacerbate them. While anarchism has a complex history, I use it here as a socio-political framework and potential alternative to representative democracy. Anarchism emphasizes liberatory and anti-oppressive values, such as anti-racism, anti-capitalist economics, and environmental sustainability. Anarchist organizational models encourage more direct and collective mechanisms of engagement while minimizing exploitation. Examples include mutual learning, exchanges of knowledge or skills to learn from and with others; or coalition building, where communities coordinate their disparate efforts to advance shared goals.

At the root of anarchism is a principle called prefigurative politics, where work "expresses the political 'ends' of their actions through their 'means.'" This approach both articulates values and incorporates them into shared practices, such as using a person's personal pronouns to prefigure a more feminist future. The emphasis on both outcome and process—and outcome *through* process—aligns well with many working definitions of design. It also suggests a rich avenue to explore as anarchism shows some affinity to existing design research work, e.g. participatory design's focus on underrepresented and affected stakeholders; speculative design's imaginings of radical

futures. Prefigurative design builds on these traditions, but emphasizes a commitment to the material: design-based work might raise awareness of systemic injustices, for example, but an attention to the material would actively address and challenge them. By orienting both our design artifacts and processes towards progressive political efforts, we can imagine and actively build alternative futures by leveraging our expertise, opportunities, networks, and resources.

Work in Progress

My current dissertation work is with an organization that diverts people to social services instead of arresting them for crimes that may be the result of extreme poverty, substance abuse, or mental health concerns. Program participants work with social workers to receive compassionate and non-punitive treatment in service of their own stated needs and goals.

This is an ideal site to explore prefigurative design: the project aims to address systemic community concerns (e.g. recidivism, homelessness) by working with and within existing institutional channels (e.g. criminal justice system, police). The staff center their care work around autonomy and healing; they only partner with service providers who respect participants' dignity, identities, and experiences. The challenge for the organization—and consequently for my design work—is to balance multiple and often competing political agendas, motivations, and goals. For example: the radical and progressive approach to their care work ensures that a participant will never be 'kicked out,' even if they are arrested for another crime or struggle with sobriety, which complicates evaluation metrics of success or failure in the program. My design work requires that I collaborate with staff to negotiate these concerns to build digital systems for both the 'hard' data (successes, failures, arrests) and more nuanced details around participant wellbeing and development. Given the material stakes behind these designed tools, deeply entangled with care practices, it is pertinent to revisit staff's various and changing concerns to ensure the designed artifact best addresses their needs.

Expected Contributions

This work asks how design work can contribute to alternate, progressive modes of civic engagement informed by activist communities and their radical visions. This work emphasizes moving away from existing, dominant methods—relying on extractive and transactional practices—to instead build on cumulative efforts, intervening with equity and justice. This research is not intended to produce better solutions, but to prompt the asking of better questions and encourage more intentional processes. It asks what stakes we are willing to put into our work to maintain the integrity of our research and our commitments to collaborators. I hope this work is a prompt to revisit our own research and design assumptions to better align our resources, relationships, and practices with more impactful and progressive outcomes.

Acknowledgements

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