DESIGNING CARE AND COMMONING INTO A CODE OF CONDUCT

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WE-LEFT COLLECTIVE
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ABSTRACT

Despite claims to being counterculture and a better alternative, grassroots activist design groups and free culture movements may replicate the marginalizing behaviours of dominant society, also in their governance and designs of their interaction platforms. We developed a code-of-conduct, or Community Guidelines, for our online commons-oriented group to nurture a sense of a caring and mutually responsible community. The guidelines aim to bring into online interaction the living person-to-person dialogic relationality we exhibit in collaborative work offline. Our social learning process could have implications for designing healthier online community protocols and platforms and be able to better tackle the challenges of intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers, design practitioners and policymakers alike have recently launched several initiatives to examine the ethics of large, corporate peer-to-peer social media and 'sharing economy' platforms. The architecture, interface and algorithm design of such platforms mediate how we interact, whether design fosters spreading hate speech or replicates societal structural discrimination. Even in free culture peer production (such as open source software) and activist open-design and media initiatives, there is increasing awareness that decentralization and horizontality is never benign nor inclusive by default: such communities and their infrastructuring platforms are turning to more explicit structures, roles and rules for online and offline interaction (Tourani et al., 2017; Bartlett, n.d.). However, introducing rules such as Codes of Conduct into these communities can lead to further controversy, conflict and even death threats against initiators, as the ideology of these peer-to-peer open communities is often guided by liberal values of personal freedom and rules are readily perceived as 'censorship' (Reagle, 2013; Finley, 2018).

In this exploratory paper we reflect on our experiences developing our self-organized, online peer group's Community Guidelines, with two inter-related lenses: how we crafted the guidelines in a value-conscious manner that would both illustrate and foster a sense of community care (e.g. Toombs et al., 2015) and how we identified the commons (Benkler, 2006; Hess, 2008) we aimed to prioritize and protect. We suggest such experiences provide useful information for design and justice activist groups, as well as design practitioners operating in creative collectives and new forms of decentralized organization, to foster healthier and more resilient online groups. We thus see the theme of *care* reflected in our work in our *care-ful processes* of encouraging participation while nurturing responsibility.

The group in question was initiated as a factioning from a larger group due to a value conflict related to how we perceive power, dominance, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), justice and marginalization; this, and the subculture context in which we operate, intimates that *design and peripheries* is also a relevant theme. As there remain delicate issues related to people's identities and ongoing working relationships, we will not reveal the group. We can describe the context as a large global ecosystem, or network of networks, of social activists (several thousands) working in various capacities, online and offline, and with various interests related to the commons and decentralized ways of working, from local currencies or civic tech to food coops or makerspaces. The controversy in question occurred in a

social media group, whereupon eight of us became administrators of a break-out group of about 100 members on the same platform. We immediately set upon forming the identity of the new group (i.e. explicitly welcoming of anti-racist, feminist, communist, anarchist, queer and postcolonial perspectives) and discussing its rules for interaction (i.e. following nonviolent communication, or NVC (Rosenberg, 2015)). These actions were a direct response to the controversy: both the 'contents' of the conflict (prioritizing justice and equity) and the nature of it (the 'toxic' ways to communicate online and the threat of trolls and far-right infiltration). This in turn necessitated formulating the Caring Community Guidelines (see http://tinyurl.com/y5x66lbw).

BEYOND FLOSS

At their most basic, and oversimplified, Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) and peer-to-peer open design projects consist of fungible, self-selecting individuals contributing code and/or modular designs that can be integrated into a larger whole (Tooze et al., 2014; Aitamurto et al., 2015). When the object is more than software or a product, however, such as an activist group forming around ideals related to 'sustainability', 'democratizing technologies' or a 'collaborative economy' (e.g. Ratto and Boler, 2014; OuiShare, n.d.), actors must set up their own designing-with-each-other conditions: the very objective of collaborating, the means and the ends, is to be decided together (Bakırlıoğlu & Kohtala, 2019). Grassroots activists design their own operational models in order to identify and maintain the commons of interest (such as a knowledge commons, technology or a public space). They need to protect it from enclosure (such as a proprietary firm buying or stealing an invention and licencing it), an active process of identifying valued resources and keeping them as open and shared, i.e. 'commoning' (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012). But threats to the commons do not only enter from the outside: internal group behaviours and unacknowledged power hierarchies can restrict marginalized outsiders from joining the group and internal members having a voice and equal access to decision-making (Karatzogianni and Michaelides, 2009). More and more practitioners are therefore codifying their knowledge on decentralized group governance in order to raise awareness of the key patterns that lead to conflict and group or project collapse (e.g. Costanza-Chock et al., 2018; Enspiral, n.d.). These reports aim to counteract the romanticizing discourse of open peer production that renders invisible real-life frictions, which can paralyse action but may also serve to spark innovation: the pluralities from which democratization can emerge (Hunsinger and Schrock, 2016). And these resistances, contesting hegemonic gatekeeping from within, are little different from the controversies that occur in the mainstream design research 'canon' (see Dilnot, 2017).

CRAFTING CARE-FUL GUIDELINES

We felt a sense of urgency in posting interaction guidelines based on the fractiousness of the battle we left, as well as not knowing who followed us into the new group nor their motives. We examined existing Codes of Conduct and began to adapt a document that had been developed by Walls (2018) with others for another project. We added a section, for example, explicitly calling for respect for concepts easily misrepresented (e.g. communism) and another section detailing behaviour that would not be condoned, actions associated with online trolls and increasingly far-right recruitment and group disruption (DEO, 2018). (Far-right trolling had also occurred in the conflict and exacerbated it). While a 'rule', the section also educated, representing our mission to foster our collective media literacies with regard to online extremist rhetorical strategies as well as healthier communication. The objective was to create a psychologically safe space, based on our combined expertise in media psychology and conflict management, as well as the published experiences of other activist groups.

The document was therefore both rule- and value-based (Tourani et al., 2017), with emphasis on being guidelines rather than a set of clear rules and sanctions. The principles for respectful communication were loosely based on conceptualizing P2P networks not as peer-to-peer, but rather person-to-person, inspired by Martin Buber's I-thou conceptualization of dialogic relationships (Buber, 2004/1937; see also Kent and Taylor, 1998) and building on Walls's extensive experience as a media psychologist in online mediation. This meant our members would (hopefully) learn about and reflect upon new ways to enact person-to-person dialogue as an alternative to what we have learned to do, or been trained to do by the interface design, on the dominant corporate social media platforms. While anonymity was not the problem on this forum as it is on other, more notorious, online platforms, we were still mainly strangers interacting virtually through the written word. The guidelines were crafted to draw attention to the infrastructural constraints and emphasized patience, care and shared positive experiences. We also needed to be mindful of our own time limits in being able to be present for and moderate all discussion threads and sub-threads, and fostering community literacy in self-governance would alleviate possible future problems with administrator dominance or absence.

As is the norm in open design and peer production, we self-selected for editing and writing tasks, drawn to improve those areas where we had expertise and experience and within our own time constraints. We represented diverse backgrounds, from design research, media psychology, media activism, programming, activist art, facilitation and conflict resolution and project management. The final sections included Behaviour Expectations, Harassment, Counter-

Complaining (i.e. we would not act on complaints regarding 'reverse racism' (Cabrera, 2014), 'reverse sexism', 'cisphobia' or similar); Diversity Statement; Reporting and Violations; and a Final Consideration stating that 'it's okay to have guidelines'. We included a rather long preamble, where we explained the reasons for and reasoning behind the document and asked the readers for sensitivity and courage, to be able to collectively take on the challenges related to intersectionality. As there were also sections that needed further explanation (such as 'reverse-isms' and why they were problematic, as well as a short description of nonviolent communication), the resulting document was rather long. The preamble was deliberately written to be conversational in tone, 'have a cup of tea while you read through them', to acknowledge consideration for the reader; the aim was to inspire a sense that we are in this together and not to be admonishing.

The guidelines on how to report problems to administrators and moderators were also necessary, taking into account the severe technical constraints of the platform with regard to reporting. Moreover it was necessary to address ourselves as gatekeepers, to convey a sense that the moderators were not infallible nor exempt from sanctions in the case of guideline breach. Finally we continually discussed the flexibility of the guidelines to be able to apply them also to offline interactions in future, to encourage us (as group founders) and the community members to seek and nurture inclusiveness and diversity (geographically, ethnically, culturally, etc.) in collaborative work.

We launched the Guidelines and asked all new members to read them thoroughly. Members have provided feedback on the guidelines directly which will be taken into account in following iterations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In designing *care* into the guidelines, we emphasized the 'we' to reduce any sense of us (administrators and moderators) versus 'them'. We aimed for a shared community culture of coproduction and co-governance, through the tone and semantics of the text and by adding specific guidelines. For example we encouraged members to speak up, according to NVC guidelines, if there was a discussion or comment they felt inappropriate (with examples of how to shift from derailing, provoking comments to nonviolent and respectful reactions). This would also serve to distribute the emotional labour involved in moderating a discussion and shift the task away from 'policing' to 'care' in how we interact. We aimed to foster a sense of not blaming or shaming: acknowledging how easy and 'human' it is to make mistakes and lash out in anger. New patterns of communication must be learned and we wished to learn them collectively, as, as María Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, p. 198) writes, "material engagement in labours to sustain interdependent worlds". We began to embed these new ways to interact already from the beginning, in our own admin group discussions during planning: encouraging and being care-ful with each other. We also allowed members' blocking of admins, recognizing the inherent right of an individual to protect themselves.

In designing *commoning* into the guidelines, we stated the aim to form a community (not a forum or debate hall), where focusing on respect, diversity, inclusion, members' wellbeing and learning would inform the reader of what kind of experience they could expect. We expressed empathetically that conversations about intersectionality, inequality, injustice and power would be challenging but, with compassion, could lead to transformation – a kind of commoning of care. The guidelines emphasized conscious awareness of how the technical platform mediates our interactions, in order to protect the commons of our shared humanity and members' intellectual and emotional needs. In crafting the guidelines, this meant drawing attention to the *real* (cf. Nafus, 2012), the lived and the lively that coexists in virtual worlds with the digital and the interface. For the knowledge commons, the guidelines emphasized social learning and collective agency (e.g. Rychwalska and Roszczyńska-Kurasińska, 2017) – shared responsibilities for each other in sensitive communication that could better ensure knowledge building and sharing.

We see our work as a tiny yet sincere and concerted effort to foreground relationality, person-to-person, in commons-oriented communities: precisely the entangled social-and-technical that is often explicitly evaded in peer-to-peer production, where the ideology of 'open' and 'free' values "social unfetteredness" and individual volition above all else (Nafus, 2012). 'P2P' in such a vision appears visually merely as dots joined by thin lines in a drawing of a 2D network; there is no human, emotion, conflict, consequence, flesh, locality, mess, insurrection. In our Community Guidelines we wanted to acknowledge the unclarity and shared confusion, people as real bodies in lived lives, indicating a wish for a collective experience with no clear understanding of the route nor the destination while comfortable in vagueness. Our ways of interacting and collaborating embed and enact how we see the importance of intersectionality and its challenges: 21st century social relations become "thick" (Bellacasa, 2012, referring to Donna Haraway's work): as we see it, lived, real, embodied and difficult.

For design research readers there are several implications to note. First, Codes of Conduct (particularly of the copy-paste variety) can be ineffectual for groups dealing with complex and challenging situations, especially in online interaction. Co-creating the guidelines in our case actually forced discussions that needed to happen and have led to a sense of members trying to live the principles (or, in cases of resistance, intense dialogues on why they exist). Secondly, in reflecting on our process the lens of *care* (even lightly applied) was helpful in framing what we did and why it was important, similarly to conscious

values-in-design processes (Flanagan, Howe, & Nissenbaum, 2008; Rychwalska and Roszczyńska-Kurasińska, 2017).

Our aim in this paper has been to make visible the dynamics occurring in creative peer groups, their very real conflicts and controversies, and the challenges in transforming online relationships into ones that more closely resemble offline discussion and collaboration. Whatever sociality we could hack into the technical limits of the digital platform, needed a document where care and commoning in our individual and collective pursuits was embodied.

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