Community + Culture features practitioner perspectives on designing technologies for and with communities. We highlight compelling projects and provocative points of view that speak to both community technology practice and the interaction design field as a whole. — Christopher A. Le Dantec, Editor

Extensions from the 'Field': Exploring Alternative Methods of Research Communication

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It was the spring of 2014, and we were in the midst of a multi-sited ethnography of feminist hackerspaces in Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco. Community organizers had recently begun developing these spaces as collective workshops oriented toward different ways of knowing technology. Weaving circles sat alongside soldering stations; “imposter syndrome” workshops followed electronic-textile tutorials. This was not the same technology culture associated with male “hackers” and “geeks” in start-up lofts and garages. Members of feminist hackerspaces promoted systems of hacking oriented toward alternative legacies of technology development, including histories of women’s labor.

While our first several months of fieldwork involved mostly participant observation, over time our work became more collaborative. We organized workshops with members of two hackerspaces around questions of feminist technology design. Looking to include members in a discussion of our analysis, we sent an early draft of an academic paper about our fieldwork to the groups with whom we were working. We were hoping for any comments or reactions to our writing. Instead, we received an email asking for the rewording of one sentence (conveying a member’s background more accurately). We ultimately published the paper with this change but found ourselves surprised by the modest response. The reaction seemed markedly out of character for people who devoted hours to

speaking candidly with us about their frustrations around the treatment of gender in sites of male-dominated technology development. They let us sit alongside them at workshops in their spaces and answered questions about their finances and how they interpreted their own positions of power and privilege. We suspected they had more to say about the work we had been doing, but perhaps we weren’t talking in a way that prompted discussion.

After publishing this academic paper in 2015 [1], we recirculated the work as a zine—a self-published magazine typically made with a photocopier. The zine knit together content from our published paper with local histories of feminist print production. Here we use this case to illustrate the opportunities and limitations of alternative modes of research distribution. In creating our zine, we acknowledged the active role our interlocutors played in our research process and how they helped sharpen our analytic

focus and broaden its impact. In the following sections, we describe our work to communicate our ethnographic insights to new audiences that continued conversations from the “field,” or those people and sites so studied.

CASE OF THE ZINE

The idea for our zine arose from dissatisfaction with existing models of knowledge transmission—and a chance encounter. While attending Seattle’s Short Run festival—a temporary zine fest for artists to showcase and sell their own work—we ran into Amy Burek, a feminist hackerspace member. Burek was a scientist who had previously been a Ph.D. student herself, and thus found the academic style of writing and the format of the conference paper more or less familiar. Through this zine fest we also met Emily Alden Foster, an independent illustrator and animator who had recently completed a zine of personal histories and comics around the theme of women in the workplace. She also ran a subscription service called the Womanzine Delivery Service that delivered a collection of zines made by women on a quarterly basis. Over email and video chat, we discussed a collaboration in which we would combine our research findings, Burek’s own experience as a member, and Foster’s artwork into a single piece named for the academic paper. After the initial meetings, Burek and Foster worked together for just over a month, combining text and image, before they asked us for final comments and edits. We compensated both artists for their

Insights

- Within a field site, particular communication media convey insights and shape enrollment, pointing to alternate platforms for research distribution.
- Exploring moments of acknowledgment and visibility within a field site may suggest important systems of recognition.
- The ways in which arguments circulate—and the forms they take—offer lessons for overturning the “form fetish” of paper presentations.

work through a fund that had also covered the observational research.

The zine differed from our published paper. The artists added evocative comic imagery illustrating key ideas. They removed sections of our paper discussing theory and related literature, focusing instead on our descriptions of the spaces: how they were run, what activities happen within them, and what motivated members to create them. Pushing beyond our published academic paper, our collaborators reframed a buried discussion of race and economic privilege, moving it from the middle of a section in our published paper to a page titled “The problems with ‘hacking’ and ‘making.’” With new language and sharp imagery, they described how “the terms ‘hacker’ and ‘maker’ may not properly represent people of color and the economically disadvantaged groups.” Together these edits had the unanticipated outcome of sharpening our analytic focus on questions of marginality.

In electing to create a zine, we were situating the work in the prior practice of Burek and others who were a part of the spaces we studied. For instance, a cofounder of the San Francisco site

had made zines since childhood, and the hackerspace regularly hosted workshops so that its members could craft zines as a group. Several members also spoke of the commonalities between feminist hackerspaces and the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, which sought to challenge the masculine culture of punk rock through the exchange of craft-based knowledge and the formation of

spaces to practice and record music [2]. Zines were an important means of communicating sometimes highly personal stories of abuse and injustice and documenting their own histories of the movement.

DEBUTING THE ZINE

In the winter of 2015, I (Fox) traveled from the Pacific Northwest to New York with about 150 handmade zines

One of the zines just after assembly.

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and 50 copies of the academic paper to attend a feminist zine festival hosted by Barnard College. There were hundreds of students, community organizers, professors, activists, and curious locals who gathered at the event. Also exhibiting were some 40 other zine makers “who [identified] on the feminist spectrum” [3].

Over the course of the day, the zine received several consistent reactions. Visitors regularly inquired about the types of activities facilitated by the feminist hackerspaces and a few people asked what constituted hacking. Several conversations concerned concepts of invisible work mentioned in the zine. When visitors seemed particularly interested, I offered them a copy of the conference paper.

Yet, even with this consistent interest, I saw a striking difference among visitors emerge. “So, are you a hacker?” one man asked. “Do you code?” The visitor ceased asking questions only when I explained I had done some front-end Web development. At an adjacent table, a woman presented a zine openly grappling with histories of American slavery. Her zine used images she had digitally manipulated to contest the continued regulation of black women’s bodies. Around midday, another visitor stopped at her table after circling a few times. As he thumbed through one of her zines, he began questioning her. Where had she gotten the photos? How did she produce the texture they featured? Before leaving, he suggested there was something confusing about the composition and that it should be altered.

We share this vignette to show how an alternative means of communicating research opened our project to new critical observations. Notable here is a focus on technical ability over other

forms of work, which found its way into a space meant to support voices and knowledges often unacknowledged. At the festival, this sort of questioning was not limited to zine makers whose zine titles included the word *hack*. Beyond our prior encounters within feminist hackerspaces, our zine interventions highlighted particular techniques of policing what does and does not count and a privileging of the technical. However, we were only able to make these connections because of our own involvement in this alternative form of publication. In this sense, the zine helped expand our questions and sites of inquiry.

EXTENDING THE DIALOGUE

Over the coming months, the conversations and ideas that developed at the zine fest continued through the circulation of our zine. After the Barnard festival, the zine found several homes. The Barnard zine library and the Philadelphia Public Library both took copies to add to their collections. We soon made a PDF of the zine available on our project website, along with an offer to mail a hard copy to interested parties at no cost. A few months after this release, the popular feminist writer Ann Friedman recommended the zine in her newsletter. With this endorsement, we immediately noticed a marked increase in traffic to our site. Several mentions of the piece on Twitter and Facebook and dozens of requests for paper copies soon followed. In a surprising turn of events, the zine even reappeared in our own research circles—for instance, in Twitter chats about civic media and in a blogpost about the limitations of discussions of in/visibility by a digital humanist. Over time the zine helped us gather and broaden a conversation on issues of feminism and design.

As studies of technology continue to refigure traditional models of participation for researcher and subject, our understanding of participation among those represented in research summations will continue to change, complicating our expectations for knowledge transmission beyond academia. Intertwining our objects of study

**Intertwining
our objects of study
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A set of zines ready to be shipped.

with the people and ideas represented changes the accounts we produce. The moments of production, debut, and distribution outlined here show the importance of reflecting back on our techniques of representation—and imagining what translations (while always partial) might effectively extend them.

Alongside highlighting this possibility for new systems of knowledge transmission, our project reveals something for the research study itself. The zine development not only helped us bring our accounts back to the field, reinterpreting them for new audiences, but it also extended the scope of our project. For example, our experience observing the zine fest prompted us to ask what makes something a feminist design, where the design might entail a feminist hackerspace, zine, technology, and so on. Conversely, it prompted us to ask how a design activity may reconfigure feminist ideals. Following up on these questions in ongoing fieldwork, our original academic publication—as a product of our methods and transmissions—created a “thick” device for thinking with our communication media.

However, the zine’s role in our project was by no means a given. The zine would not have been appropriate in every setting, and it was certainly not the only form for

this site either. Perhaps a hackathon with a critical bent would have opened our conversations to broader audiences. Or a Twitter chat would have more thoroughly catalogued our conversations beyond local sites. Each mechanism offers a different set of partial openings into sites of technological study. To help researchers of the sociotechnical produce their own extensions, we submit three questions for those reporting back to the field:

- What transmissions emerge in the site? Within a given field site, particular communication media (zines, tweets, Tumblr feeds, podcasts) come to convey insights and shape enrollment. These media provide a means of examining alternate platforms for distribution (here, short-run publications).

- What kinds of authorship do people gather around? Exploring moments of acknowledgment and visibility already reverberating in a site suggests alternative modes of recognition (here, often collective and collaborative).

- What rhetorical devices do people use to make their arguments? The ways in which arguments circulate—and the forms they take—offer lessons for overturning the “form fetish” [4] of paper presentations, wherein an established textual presentation prefigures evidentiary claims (here,

comic illustrations and manifestos).

Together these questions help us imagine new knowledge representations within design and technology studies. Their commonsense form invites us to ask why so little experimentation has occurred. Perhaps one answer lies in the case study we began with. Feminist anthropologists like Marilyn Strathern and Margaret Wolf have long questioned representations of the “other” by recognizing the remnants of colonialism in their wake (see [4]). Studies of technology have a similar responsibility to surface and make sense of the power relations within. Beyond telling a convincing or evocative story, our transmissions require incorporating new kinds of participation for those being represented and, in doing so, require new paths for research dissemination, reaching beyond those already under way.

ENDNOTES

1. Fox, S., Ulgado, R.R., and Rosner, D.K. Hacking culture, not devices: Access and recognition in feminist hackerspaces. *Proc. of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. ACM, New York, 2015, 55–68.
2. Hanna, K. and Fateman, J. *The Riot Grrrrl Collection*. The Feminist Press at CUNY, New York, 2014.
3. NYC Feminist Zine Fest: A Showcase. Barnard College; <http://barnard.edu/events/nyc-feminist-zine-fest>
4. Wolf, M. *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford Univ. Press, 1992.

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