

The Politics of Me: Visualizing Affordances of the Designer

Jessica Jacobs
Columbia College Chicago
Chicago, IL USA
jjacobs@colum.edu

ABSTRACT

The Politics of Me: Visualizing Affordances of the Designer is an interactive, online participatory situated action that seeks to foster communication and collaboration among participants engaged with anti-racist, anti-oppressive methodologies intended to develop equitable design interventions and solutions. During the online interaction, participants create and discuss their own personal data visualizations. In response to the conference call for *Participation(s) Otherwise*, how might we make transparent plural understandings and privileges (associated with race, gender, ethnicity, class, etc.) with the hopes of facilitating collaboration towards designing for more equitable, systemic solutions?

Author Keywords

equity; politics; identity politics; anti-racism; critical communication design; data visualization

OVERVIEW

The Politics of Me: Visualizing Affordances of the Designer; an interactive, online participatory situated action that seeks to foster communication and collaboration among participants engaged with anti-racist, anti-oppressive methodologies intended to develop equitable design interventions and solutions. During the online interaction, participants create and discuss their own personal data visualizations. In response to the conference call for *participation(s) otherwise*, this project asks, how might we make transparent plural understandings and realities with the hopes of facilitating collaboration?

As Fry states, “design gives material form and directionality to the ideological embodiment of a particular

politics.”[1] In this context, politics refers to the political beliefs, actions, practices, and policies as well as the arrangements of power and authority between actors (human and non-human) in society. As Escobar notes, there is a lack of research on design practice and relationship to capitalism, gender, race, development and modernity.[2] Relations among design, politics, power, and culture still need to be examined.

As many have noted, design utilizes methodologies that possess an illusion of neutrality situated outside of a societal or systemic context which inherently reifies discrimination by masking the biases of designers and co-creators.[3.4] Shifting design processes and practices towards more sustainable, equitable solutions requires interventions at all levels—individual, project, organizational, institutional, and system. This situated action explores the individual context. This project proposes that if a designer seeks to make the politics of the design process transparent so that solutions might be more equitable, the politics of the individual designer must be interrogated.

The empathic designer still possesses their own history, politics, and intentions that color the orientation of that empathy. Building on the feminist mantra, “the personal is political”, this design activity seeks to surface the politics of the individual in order to place them in context for collaborative participatory design activities. As participatory design seeks to challenge the role of designer as specialist or expert, how might designers use data visualization to identify their own lack of expertise in other cultures, in each other, and in their own blind spots?

The purpose of this action is twofold. First, to use the tools of design to facilitate conversation, awareness, and collaboration to do equity-oriented design work. It prompts designers to build this reflexivity and awareness into personal and organizational design practices and processes. How might we encourage designers to understand their own identity as a techno-

logy that has specific affordances within participatory design processes? Second, this action highlights the limits of visual representation in capturing complexity, articulation, and shared understanding when engaging with individual and systemic power, privilege, bias, oppression, and exploitation. What kinds of data visualization might express our politics? How does data visualization both reveal and obscure oppression?

Theory

Inspired by participatory design's acknowledgement of power and politics inherent in design practices, *The Politics of Me* seeks to raise questions of power and privilege so that all participants can better understand one another's subject positions. In addition, this project is informed by theories from critical communication design, feminism, and anti-racist activism.

Critical communication design asks, what data is actually available to us, and what are its inherent biases and limitations? D'Ignazio claims that "Even when we rationally know that data visualizations do not represent 'the whole world', we forget that fact and accept charts as facts because they are generalized, scientific and seem to present an expert, neutral point of view." [5] The second intention of *The Politics of Me* is to expose the illusion of data as "the view from nowhere." [6] As Boehnert states, "Data reflects power relations, special interests and ideologies in terms of which data is collected, what data is used and how it is used." [7] This project asks information designers to build on their own reflexivity, "guided by a desire to understand data through the perspectives and practices of both their keepers and subjects." [8]

Finally, this activity is informed by methods from community organizing, movement building, feminism, and anti-racist activism. In these domains, it is common practice to build community by beginning engagements with personal, reflective exercises. Examples include asking people to reflect on how their racial and ethnic backgrounds and experiences has informed their worldviews as well as those of others that they interact with. [9] This is a highly relational practice that encourages the sharing of potentially conflicting beliefs and negative feelings within a supportive space. Informed by these methods, toolkits intended to help designers with design processes that are more participatory, transparent, and politically oriented to address systemic inequity build on these activist practices by asking users to reflect on their personal identity and

power with questions like "How does my identity and role in this project affect how and what people share with me?" [10] and "How does my relationship to power impact my work (in community, while designing, with other people, etc.)?" [11] However, many designers lack the language or training to be able to engage in this discourse. This project explores ways in which data visualization could catalyze collaboration when people lack shared language for this work.

Activity

Participants create and discuss their own personal data visualizations during this online, interactive situated action. The data visualization exercise asks individuals to develop an understanding of their racial or ethnic group in context of community, country, and/or nationality. Its goal is to surface and communicate the complexity and intersectionality of identities and how those structure interactions, relationships, and livelihoods. Data points for the visualizations could include: race, gender, gender presentation, sexual orientation, ability, class, age, ancestry, religion, education, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, and geography. Access to resources, technology, and healthcare could also be explored. By determining what might go into the graphic and how to represent it, we converse about our histories and values.

The facilitator will invite participants to engage with online collaborative software to create their own visualization with basic templates constructed from simple materials. Participants will be able choose a reflective prompt, or choose to generate something on their own. Prompts could be something like:

- Who do I have power over? Who has power over me?
- How do people see me? How do I see myself?
- How far did my parents have to travel to go to work?
- How many times have I felt afraid in a public bathroom? Has that changed over time?
- How diverse is the city that I live in? What kind of diversity am I describing?
- How do I feel about police officers?
- Have I ever been discriminated against? For what reason?
- Have I ever discriminated against someone else? For what reason?
- How much debt do I have right now?

The functions of the visualizations could include:

comparisons, relationships, hierarchy, location, distribution, concepts, flows, patterns, processes, mapping, and temporality. By framing these data points as affordances, we use the language of design to illustrate how constructed identities function as technologies that interact with and affect flows of power and privilege within social, cultural, political, and economic systems.

As with any representation of information, we would also interrogate what is left out of the visualizations. How do they reflect mindsets, beliefs, values and worldviews? What are the points of intersection among participants? What is fertile ground for dialogue, collaboration, and collective creation? By surfacing information and creating knowledge about ourselves and others, we might potentially increase agency among participants and develop more equitable solutions.

Time requirements

This will be a synchronous 90-minute online interaction with some additional, asynchronous communication with participants before and after the event.

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