

# Good Design Won't Save the World (And What to Do About It)

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I approach the CSCW workshop “Reflections on Design for Underserved Communities” as a non-designer with a political-economic challenge in hand. Based on a year of participant-observation with low-income older adults in inner-city Chicago, I contend that the conversation around design impact for underserved populations must speak in some way to the politics and economics of technology diffusion (Rogers, 2010; Tsai & LaRose, 2015). While the CSCW community has succeeded in germinating the valuable seeds of design innovations, the attention paid to the broader socio-economic soil on which those seeds are cast, as well as the reasons why those seeds tend to fall short of reaching their intended users, is lacking. I argue that design for underserved populations must incorporate a recognition of the affordances of the political-economic system into which new designs are thrust. I take as my case the daily use of mobile technology by older adults in extreme poverty as an example of the limits of design to save the world. At the same time, I propose the case as an opportunity to think about design for underserved populations as a problem of politics and economics as well as apps and interfaces.

In my research with low-income clients of a social service agency in Chicago, I find that mobile phones have strong potential to mitigate the daily pains of poverty and homelessness. The ability to call and text on a personal device while on the go is of particular advantage to individuals whose daily routines are shaped by a precarity or lack of shelter, income, and privacy. Take the case of Joni, a woman with long, sandy-colored hair in her late 50s who aspires to rent an apartment for her and her ailing husband to live out their days. Until then, it is a rotation of shelters that Joni calls home, while her husband is tended to at a low-cost nursing home. To coordinate a slew of tasks – doctor’s appointments, job interviews, shelter reservations, meetings with her social worker – Joni relies on a workaround system of landline phones, library computers, and a basic-model cell phone she obtained through government subsidies.

It is the latter device, her “Obama phone,” that Joni treasures most – and is most often annoyed by. The screen is small and difficult for Joni to read, who wears a pair of generic bifocals on a band around her neck. The menu system seems to vex Joni, as it seems to require “clicking ten different buttons” in order to start a text. Perhaps most of all, it is the service limitations of a government-subsidized phone that vexes her: “They [wireless companies contracted by the government] give you 250

minutes each month. Which isn’t much. ... Because that includes texting, because they take out like 30 seconds for each text. And then parts of minutes are deducted as whole minutes. You don’t get partial minute credit when you’re talking on the phone. Which I think is crazy, but that’s just the way the phones work.”

Joni is regularly found at one of the computers at the social service offices where I conduct my research. She is following job leads, pulling up directions, looking up numbers of doctor’s offices, or on Yahoo checking entertainment news. Joni was once employed as a secretary, and seems to have little difficulty navigating search engines and web forms. In this case, Joni’s issue is not ability or design, but affordability. As Joni reminds me, “The government doesn’t give out smartphones.”

Margaret, however, does own a smartphone. Like Joni, her ambitions in arriving at the social service agency were to secure her own apartment. Unlike her younger peer Joni, however, Margaret qualified for public housing as a senior. She shows me the photos of her new apartment with adept swipes across the palm-sized screen of her second-hand LG. Margaret’s phone rings, only the sound comes from another phone, tucked into an outer pocket of the suitcase she continues to pull behind her from her homeless days. She pulls out a small plastic phone with a keypad from her bag and hits a green button. After the call, I ask Marge why she takes calls on another phone. “I got free minutes on this government one,” she answers, before pointing at the LG displaying a photo in my hand, “Can’t afford a plan on that one.”

The observations I gleaned from Joni and Marge illustrate a challenge and an opportunity for design scholars who are driven by an ethic of technology that works for everyone. The challenge is how to envision inclusive technology as technology that not only works well for underserved populations, but also that is likely to reach underserved populations. For the older adult clients of one Chicago social service agency, the primary barrier to the successful integration of mobile technology into their daily lives is affordability. It is the design of a government subsidy program – called Lifeline, and bolstered by an uncertain politics - that ensures access to decades-old technology for these poorest Americans. It is also the broader design of a market-centered political regime in America that aging individuals can find themselves marooned in inner cities without reliable shelter, much less the disposable income to spend on a device with advanced accessibility features.

The devil's advocate might argue that the advancement of technology for underserved populations is possible only when the concerns of politics and market are held at bay. In this view, the university is a haven for innovation precisely because researchers there are not called to incorporate certain political-economic facts into their work. The implicit framing for design research is, 'If my design were placed into the hands of a member of my target population...' Less often is it asked whether designs intended for underserved populations will end up on the market, and if they do, when and to what extent they will reach the hands of underserved people.

My observations with older adults living through extreme poverty in the inner city suggest that underserved populations stand to gain the most from media technologies that address their particular needs. I challenge the participants of the workshop to reflect on their research in terms of the viability of new designs within a political economy such as the U.S. Should our awareness of the potential for the successful diffusion of our designs operate in a separate sphere of attention - design in the lab and politics at the coffee shop? How might a closer attention to political-economic viability for new technologies mesh with the design process? How can we design technologies that reach those who typically cannot afford them?

#### **REFERENCES**

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