

Public Design for Underserved Communities: a European Case Study

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ABSTRACT

As CSCW and HCI researchers are increasingly interested in supporting the needs of underserved communities, the European Union is unfortunately becoming an interesting case in point given the persistent growth of huge social problems such as poverty, low income, unemployment, precarious jobs, and large migratory flows from non-Western countries. In this paper we present a Collective Awareness Platforms for Sustainability and Social Innovation (CAPS) project called ‘PIE News’, which aims to design a digital platform that will supplement the existing public measures contrasting conditions of poverty, lack of income and unemployment in Europe by adopting a public design approach. We provide a description of actors, methods, and goals of the project, and we reflect over two methodological and epistemological challenges that affect HCI research on and for underserved communities.

Author Keywords

Public design, social innovation, European Union, underserved communities

INTRODUCTION

As diverse and inherently interdisciplinary research field, CSCW and HCI comprise different methods, intellectual perspectives, established genres, and emerging issues [4]. With regard to the latter, HCI researchers are increasingly paying attention to social and political issues, as well as working with actors who operate outside of traditional academic boundaries such as NGOs, governments, activists, and socially marginalized groups [5]. A similar focus implies for HCI researchers to expand their analytic and methodological approaches in order to develop an appropriate understanding of contexts, conditions, and challenges that a similar research commitment implies.

The European Union is unfortunately becoming an interesting case in point given the increasing growth of huge social problems such as poverty, low income, unemployment, precarious jobs, and large migratory flows from non-Western countries. In this context, the European Commission promotes the Collective Awareness Platforms for Sustainability and Social Innovation (CAPS) initiative that aims at designing and piloting online platforms to support environmentally aware, grassroots processes and practices enabling citizens to share knowledge, make better

informed decisions, set up more participatory democratic processes.

In this paper, we present a CAPS project called ‘PIE News’ which aims to design a digital platform that will supplement the existing public measures contrasting conditions of Poverty, lack of Income and unEmployment in Europe (what we define as ‘PIE conditions’). In order to achieve these goal, the project adopts a ‘public design’ approach [7, 17, 17] that will lead to the creation of the PIE News platform. The overarching ambition of the project is to pilot solutions that can bring to the commonfare as a form of welfare that leverages the network effects and the collaborative co-creation of solutions to cope with difficulties in everyday life [3].

For its being a large-scale, multi-lingual and action research project, PIE News entails different publics, sites, and social issues. This complexity in terms of issues and population at stake generates relevant challenges for design methods, but also interesting reflexive insights that invite to pay more attention to design processes rather than to the final outcome.

PIE NEWS – ACTORS, APPROACHES, GOALS

According to Eurostat (2014), more than 122 million people in Europe (about 24% of the European population) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while the percentage of the population in condition of severe material deprivation has been growing from 9% in 2008, to 10% in 2013. The situation differs from country to country: new Member States show a very high and stable level of material deprivation (around 20%), while the older member countries show lower but growing levels of material deprivation. In some countries, such as Italy, material deprivation has almost doubled from 2008 to 2012 reaching a peak of about 14%. This trend clearly shows that the conventional welfare measures adopted by the Member States are insufficient and there is a need for new tools to supplement existing measures.

Against this backdrop, the PIE News project aims at contrasting new forms of poverty and siding conventional welfare state measures with an innovative approach that harnesses the collaborative power of digital technologies through the construction of the PIE News platform called ‘commonfare.net’. The platform will allow people and

social groups that are particularly at risk of poverty or social exclusion (e.g. women, young people, people living in single-parent households, lower educated people and migrants according to the European Commission) to *inform* and to be informed about public measures contrasting poverty, to *share* good practices on how to cope with their situation, and to find support in *networking* activities able to bring value to their everyday life.

PIE News consortium is made up of several actors: users' organizations, social sciences researchers, hackers, and ICT research institutions with an interdisciplinary profile. These actors have different backgrounds, geographical and social locations, and tasks to carry out in the project. They articulate their actions in three pilot sites: Croatia, Italy and The Netherlands. These three locations represent a newcomer to the European Union (Croatia), a big Southern European country with significant economic problems (Italy), and one of the richest countries in Europe which resembles economic recovery from the recession of the last years (the Netherlands). Geographically, 9 big cities have been selected as the main settings for the pilot activities: Zagreb, Rijeka, Split and Osijek (Croatia), Milan and Rome (Italy), Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague (The Netherlands).

The pilot partners have chosen specific target groups representative of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. More specifically, in Croatia the pilot is done with unemployed youth, the Italian pilot focuses on precarious and unemployed workers, while the Dutch pilot focuses on several groups at risk of poverty such as the recipients of welfare state provisions, single mothers, non-Western migrants, and the self-employed.

In order to achieve the specific objectives of informing, sharing, and supporting, which, in turn, are the practices that nurture the commonfare, PIE News adopts and promotes a public design approach [7, 16] that provides a methodology of intervention able to connect dispersed public concerned with the PIE conditions and aggregated through the platform. Public design locates aims to expand the practices of what is known as 'Participatory Design' [13] toward a community-driven approach [6], that focuses on public formation [10], and that is able to promote the emergence of digital commons [16]. This line of research openly aligns with the CAPS initiative's goals as to the promotion of the effective involvement of citizens and of relevant actors, as well as establishment of durable collaborations in concrete application areas related to sustainability.

Empirically, such deeply user-driven approach entails the direct and large involvement of three well known users' organizations (Basic Income Network in Italy, Center for Peace Studies in Croatia, Museu da Crise in The Netherlands) operating in the three pilot sites, which organize networking initiatives in order to involve people affected by PIE conditions. Indeed, for being organizations that deal with underserved people on daily basis, the three

pilot partners can build a bridge with the potential user base. Each is divided in four separate, yet partially overlapping and intertwined activities. Since the design and implementation of the PIE News platform will be an iterative and modular process in collaboration with the design and technical partners, the activities carried out by pilot partners are directly connected with the whole consortium through the PIE News Design Workshops which take place periodically.

On the basis of the early public design activities, the PIE News platform will feature three key components:

1. *Information Hub*: the organized information on welfare state provisions the people in the PIE conditions could benefit from (training, mobility, etc.);
2. *Stories Hub*: the organized collection of existing stories and tools to facilitate the production and upload of new stories practices through collaborative storytelling;
3. *Networking Hub*: the organized collection of networking tools, each one well described and open to incremental improvement via people intervention.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

PIE News has the ambition to engage in a large-scale, multi-lingual and international design process, starting with the locations of the specific pilots but not limited to them. A similar configuration entails several challenges. Indeed, although the project is in its early stage (the design phase started in September 2016), some critical nodes are already emerging and deserve attention. Here, we would like to discuss two main issues which we are currently reflecting upon.

In the first place, following the principles and strategies of reflective design as a technical practice [12], we are focusing on understanding what are the centers and the margins of the project. Speaking of margins, we draw upon feminist inquiry in STS [8, 14] and recent feminist-oriented contributions in the fields of HCI and CSCW [1, 2, 15] in order to scrutinize and intervene on different aspects of the project such as, for example, the intended and unintended effects of design practices, and the alignment between the values that nurture the design of the platform and their technical actualization. These concerns bring up crucial questions such as what and whom is this built for? Whose voices and visions does it comprise? Who is left out? Could it have been otherwise? Such epistemological and methodological issues reflect practical inquiries that range from the potential gender biases inscribed into the design process to its potential to confront gender diversity and to build technical environments that are safe and comfortable for everyone.

A second critical issue we would like to confront is the role of emotional landscapes in developing attachments central to the constitution of publics [11, 9, 10]. Poverty, precarity, job insecurity, unemployment, low income are in fact life

and social conditions that PIE News intends to tackle and contrast. They are sensitive issues that often convey strong emotional dispositions ranging from resistance, anger and distrust to happiness, pleasure, and optimism. Additionally, it is important to point out that these feelings mark not only the conditions of those underserved communities involved in design activities, but also the work of researchers. The inquiry we would like to advance here is how to develop attachment and affective bonds with a technical object given the ambivalent emotional configuration that the project entails.

In light of these reflections, we argue that CSCW and HCI research interested in supporting the needs of underserved communities cannot help but develop its analytic and methodological inquiries by starting to ask the ‘*cui bono?*’ question [14], that is to say by assessing the ethical and political implications of studying technology from the point of view of marginal positions. Not doing so may carry the risk to reproduce those same inequalities that these projects aim to confront. On the other hand, we stress the agential role of emotions in expanding the discourse around the attachments that mobilize the public engagement in societal challenges.

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