Making Trouble: redesigning the rituals of civic life

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Abstract:

McVeigh-Schultz's work uses strategies of speculative design to disrupt the seamlessness of everyday experience. This paper describes a series of ongoing performative interventions titled "Vox Pop Experiments," exploring new rituals of interaction for emerging models of civic engagement. McVeigh-Schultz uses mobile technology and other networked objects to generate moments where meaning is actively struggled over in an attempt to disrupt the familiar in civic life.

Key Words
ritual, design, civics

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The following paper lays out an approach that I refer to as ritual design and makes an argument for its worth as a research methodology. Ritual design, as I conceive of it, seeks to disrupt the seamlessness of the everyday. As a design strategy, shares commonality with interactivity design but shifts the emphasis to consider, not only objects, systems, and experiences, but more specifically, ritualized patterns of behavior and implicit norms of social interaction as available for critical re-design.

On a note of clarification, the concept of ritual, as I use it here, should not conjure up the prototypical ecclesiastic ritual or any other variant of the classic Durkheimian (1915) model (where focus is placed on the separation between sacred and profane). Instead, ritual, as I use the term, can be any 'genre of practice' organized into a readable social 'event.' In this way, my terminology draws more from the micro-sociology of Goffman's interaction ritual (1967) or Garfinkel's notion of situated action (1967). In thinking about ritual as a field of design, however, I am not opposed to the more traditional notion of ritual as a bridge to transcendent values and experiences, but my work locates these transcendent linkages in rituals of the everyday.

For me, design research is a strategy of intervention and discovery. In terms of Fallman's (Fallman 2007) distinction between design-oriented research and research-oriented design, I place my work firmly on the side of former, emphasizing design as a process of knowledge formation as oppose to one that favors technical sophistication or commercially oriented prototypes.

Related concepts include: reflective design (Sengers et al. 2006), critical design (Dunne 2008), reflective HCI (Dourish et al. 2004), value-sensitive design (Friedman 1996), and critical making (Ratto 2011). Of these, critical making moves beyond a focus on the object to emphasize process and collaboration. Ritual design, also places emphasis on process, but rather than focusing on the process of collaboratively making objects, I focus on the process of disrupting interaction. My approach also shares ground with the improvisational strategies of Garfinkel's breaching experiments (1967), Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, and performance strategies of the Situationist and Fluxus movements. Harold Garfinkel once described his methodological "preference to start with the familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble" (Ibid). Garfinkel would encourage his students to deliberately violate unspoken social norms in order to understand how they are actively constructed and negotiated. My work applies Garfinkel's notion of breaching experiments to the design of interactions.

Much of the work I do explores the possibilities of frustrated interaction with both humans and objects, upending the priorities of user interface design. These projects include objects that can only be seen when you close your eyes, as well as tactile interfaces that don't want to be touched. Another project prototyped a prosthetic device that conversation partners wear in their mouths, providing visual and auditory feedback about the speaker's level of online popularity (as a measure of retweets). In this work, I deliberately designed the objects to frustrate communication by awkwardly interjecting online status into physical space.

Ethnomethodologists and sociolinguists have studied how, in new face-to-face encounters, strangers will negotiate a dance of expectations as they quickly calibrate their identities to reflect shared membership categories. This kind of contextual negotiation can become precarious, though, when communication is technologically mediated. In my work, I use mobile interfaces — and other networked objects — to trigger this kinds of precariousness, shuffling familiar ritual templates to generate experiences where context is underdetermined and actively struggled over.

Civic rituals are of particular interest to me as subjects of ritual (re)design, In particular the vox pop (or on the street) interview has served as a productive topic. I am interested in the ways that broadcast journalism uses the vox pop to reflect a particular image of the public back to itself. The vox pop represents a particular kind of contrived difference, in which the public is curated into a set of compartmentalized identity types, with broadcast media positioning itself conveniently as the neutral intermediary (a phenomenon that Nick Couldry has described as the 'myth of the mediated center').

An ongoing project of mine, *The Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments*, has been an attempt to performatively destabilize this process of public curation. The Synaptic Crowd platform enables online participants to nominate and vote on questions online while they watch an interview unfold in real-time. Drawing upon McLuhan's imagery of electronic media as prosthetic extensions, the project explores a series of performative experiments in which networked audiences intervene into public space (McVeigh-Schultz 2009).

Put most simply what the *Synaptic Crowd* platform does is enable online participants to conduct collaborative "on the street" interviews without actually having to be "on the street." In other words, participants need not be co-present with their interview subject, nor with each other. However, interviews *are* conducted in physical space

through an intermediary wielding a camera and a phone. The Synaptic Crowd tool integrates browser and mobile interfaces, along with face-to-face interaction. Online participants submit potential questions or statements to a public pool and then select the question or statement that they most want to hear at a given time. The question or statement that has been selected most gets relayed to the intermediary's phone. And then online participants watch the interviewee's response as they formulate follow ups, a feature which sets the Synaptic Crowd apart from other sorts of online question aggregation and vote-ranking tools.

In this way audiences participate in the process of constructing the public, making active decisions not only about which questions to ask, but when to ask a follow-up and when to introduce a new line of questioning. Of particular interest to me were the emergence of what I have been calling 'inter-sequitors.' These are questions that demand an ad hoc reweaving of context, prompting the interviewees to move between different subject positions as they struggle to adapt to an unseen audience.

By facilitating a live feedback loop between audience and subject, the Synaptic Crowd shuffles the agencies of the interview and enables different kinds of questions to be asked. Likewise, by destabilizes the compartmentalizing logic of the traditional vox pop, different sorts of social encounters are possible. In this sense, I situate the work as "making trouble" for the assumptions that traditional journalism creates when it uses social media to curate the public back to itself.

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