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Infrastructuring in PD - What does infrastructuring look like? When does it look like that?

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ABSTRACT

In¹ this hands-on workshop we invite the PD community to take stock of empirical insights and conceptual developments around the notions of infrastructure and infrastructuring. We propose that by leveraging the original relational nature of these concepts, we can revitalize the political soul of PD and better characterize the politics of participation in digitalization phenomena and processes ongoing in all walks of life. With a hands-on approach we will collectively and critically map, disentangle assumptions, identify blind spots and outline new research opportunities charting the possibilities and limitations of an infrastructuring approach in PD at large.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Human-centered computing → Participatory design

KEYWORDS

Infrastructuring, politics, relational

1 BACKGROUND

The notion of infrastructuring has been taking hold in the Participatory Design (PD) community as a way to address some of the ongoing developments and contemporary challenges relating to the increasingly networked and connected society. Underlying the relational concept of infrastructuring is a political perspective that speaks directly to the soul of PD, because infrastructuring constantly shapes power relations [1, cf. 2]. However, despite the promises of opening up participation to knowledge sharing and production, the dynamics of participatory processes that shape infrastructuring efforts remain underspecified. As a consequence, the aim of this workshop is to promote a political sensitivity to the study of, engagement with, intervention into and design for infrastructuring processes in PD. In concrete we want to ask: How can we characterize and engage with the politics of participation for infrastructuring processes?

A recent literature review by Karasti [3] has traced some of the ways in which the notion of ‘information infrastructure’ [1,4,5] has been adopted and adapted by PD researchers and practitioners, and how diverse and intellectually challenging conceptions of infrastructuring have found their ways into PD research and practice. Taking stock of the infrastructuring literature in PD up until 2014, the review discussed what a focus on infrastructuring as key organizing principle for PD studies and interventions has meant conceptually [3]. It highlighted, for example, that research has shifted towards broadening the focus from mere technologies to their embedding practices; helping account for the imbrication of the social and the technical; directing attention to the fundamentally relational quality of infrastructures; making visible the more extended periods of time during which infrastructuring unfolds; and extending design towards continuing/ongoing, more open-ended processes [e.g., 6–15].

The study of infrastructures and infrastructuring has proliferated not only in PD but also in related fields, such as CSCW, STS, and anthropology [16–19]. In addition, the application of the notion has broadened to new domains in PD [20–24]. The studies have continued to address the extended dimensions of infrastructuring. For instance, by expanding the organizational and institutional reach of infrastructuring [25–27]; and by attending to the temporal scopes of infrastructuring, not only directing attention to the future direction and reach ‘beyond the PD project’ common in PD [28], but also to the past dimension, e.g. socio-historical dimension [29]. In addition, the repertoire of activities considered in relation to infrastructuring has expanded to include tailoring, appropriating, tuning, modifying, tweaking, making, fixing, monitoring, maintaining, repairing, hacking, and vandalizing [e.g., 7–9,11,13,14,30–33]. This points to a rich set of intentionalities and interventions with different political connotations [16] that incrementally shape infrastructures. In line with this, a recent special issue on ‘Infrastructuring and Collaborative Design’ with focus on research that engages with a processual (in-the-making) perspective and/or design-oriented engagement with information infrastructures, points out that the gerund ‘infrastructuring’ carries with it a move from a ‘fixed ontology’ to a ‘process ontology’ and that infrastructures are ‘engines of political change’, thus suggesting a perpetual refiguring at the heart of infrastructuring [17].

During the workshop we thus invite participants to take the relational nature of infrastructuring as an analytical lens to articulate new political sensitivities in PD. In so doing, we envision that the workshop will make three contributions:

- Revitalize the conversation around the political roots of PD into ongoing infrastructuring processes and phenomena. For example, one of the questions that we will explore is; what spaces of inclusion and exclusion do infrastructuring processes create?
- Advance the field of PD by identifying and elaborating on a set of diversifying dimensions and expanding scopes, activities, intentions, and interventions. For example; How can we as researchers engage in the becoming and in the study of large-scale, long-term digital technology projects?

Propose emerging themes (or researchable problems) that future research and practice in PD should acknowledge. For example, What does it mean to participate when other forms of agency are involved (e.g. ,it is algorithms which “do” something)?

As a result, we are seeking to share our questions and thoughts with the broad community. This workshop will be the second iteration, following one already scheduled to happen at EASST2018 conference, targeted more at STS audience.

2 HOW TO PARTICIPATE

We expect participants from a broad range of domains (PD, STS, CSCW and related fields), with an interest in infrastructuring from multiple perspectives. While deep expertise is not required, familiarity with the basic concepts is advisable. We ask interested participants to send a “position statement” that can do some of the initial work to articulate and visualize issues of importance and relevance for each participant (DL: 10th of May).

The format of this position statement is open and can be experimental. It can include anything from short visual essays, to mind maps, soundscapes or textual essays and typographic experiments. Textual contributions should be between 2 to 3 A4 pages saved as PDF file. In the case of submitting a contribution relying heavily on audiovisual material (video or sound), we will ask contributors to submit an introductory text with a URL link.

Participants will be selected based on the experimental statement they submit, trying to cover different opinions and diversity of arguments.

3 WORKSHOP FORMAT AND OUTCOMES

Prior to the workshop, participants will be asked to look at 1) their own projects and 2) a collective compilation of articles and case studies that deal with infrastructuring in PD to jointly prepare issues, ideas and concerns to work through in the workshop.

The day of the workshop we will start with a brief introduction by the organizers to set up the agenda for the day. As a starting point to the collective effort we propose to “draw together” [34]: “What does infrastructuring look like? and even more importantly, “When does it look like that?” [4]. Participants will work in small groups in a series of joint exercises presenting to each other their insights and questions, creating concept maps and visualizations of the cases and their interrelations. The material produced by the groups will be documented and gathered by each team and collectively presented at several points during the day. During the afternoon we will devote time to synthesize and integrate the discussions, produce a table of contents for the material and plan its final format.

We envision various outcomes for this WS. The first and most immediate one will be a “Field guide to infrastructuring in PD” a low-fi digital publication compiling a literature collection on infrastructuring, annotated with drawings, visualization and other results gathered during the workshop. This digital zine can also turn into a more polished publication, with further post- production work, if there is interest and commitment from some of the participants. We are also in the process of planning a special issue for a journal on a related topic, and we plan to encourage participants to refine some of their materials and ideas towards that end.

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