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Collaborative Narrative Visions and the Manifesto Machine

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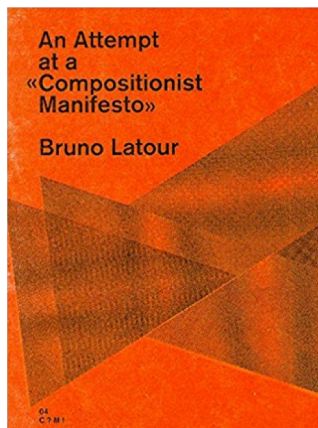


Figure 1: Latour's
Compositionist Manifesto
(2010).

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Abstract

The mark of a successful academic conference is the sustained discussion and engagement that continues long after the closing session. For key event takeaways and action planning to have resonance, attendees need a means of amplifying and further edifying their shared ideas and sense of purpose. We present the *Manifesto Machine*, a collaborative writing environment for drafting and designing manifestos, and for encouraging active discussion and engagement around the topics that affect us. In this integrated demonstration, we position the Manifesto Machine as a thought probe for provoking critical self-reflection in the field of technology design, and for piecing together and making explicit a collaborative new vision of living and working together in the digital age.

Author Keywords

Collaborative and social computing; design activism; design for engagement.

ACM Classification Keywords

• **Human-centered computing**~Collaborative content creation • **Social and professional topics**~Political speech

Introduction

In his Compositionist Manifesto, Latour argues that the pursuit of progress and a common world begs a



Figure 2: Clickable categories for the We The Protesters (WTP) 10-point Campaign Zero manifesto, commonly associated with #BlackLivesMatter (2015).

repurposing of the manifesto as a "call to attention" and narrative vision for confronting new prospects and making manifest the search for universality [6]. Latour's *compositionist* framing stands in contrast with the "violence and precision" [8] that characterize avant-garde manifestos of the previous century. Instead of bold rhetoric hastening us into the world of the beyond, "so unrealistic, so utopian, so full of hype" [6], Latour urges a slower, more careful stitching together of truths in search of *the Common*.

Since 2010, the year Latour published his manifesto, technological changes such as the rise of social media have created new divisions and an increase in political extremism and populist politics. At the same time, the present decade has also seen the rise of #hashtag-driven movements [3] including #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #NeverAgain – movements that began in the US but which have had global repercussions. Digital activism has given new life to the manifesto, which accommodates easily to online environments and their demand for clear, concise, impactful expression. Recent online manifestos announcing a variety of platforms include #CampaignZero,¹ #NeverAgain,² #TimesUp,³ and even a French Anti-#MeToo campaign.⁴

Despite Latour's pronouncement that its time "has long passed" [6], the manifesto is reasserting itself in the

¹ <https://www.joincampaignzero.org/#vision> (commonly associated with #BlackLivesMatter)

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2018/mar/23/parkland-students-manifesto-americas-gun-laws>

³ <https://www.timesupnow.com/>

⁴ <https://www.worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/full-translation-of-french-anti-metoo-manifesto-signed-by-catherine-deneuve>

social and political mise-en-scène. In fact, the manifesto in 2018 is closer to Latour's Compositionist Manifesto, with its emphasis on positive and constructive change, than the author might have anticipated. At their best, manifestos act as advertisements for change; they build hope in an era of hopelessness; they create networks of likeminded activists, offering people a sense of community and clarity of purpose.

From an HCI and technology design perspective, the manifesto opens a window of opportunity into the design of sociotechnical interventions that prompt individuals towards modes of discussion, debate and reflection [1, 2]. Thus we introduce the latest iteration of the Manifesto Machine, a collaborative environment for drafting and designing manifestos. We showcase our recent efforts to create a collaborative online environment that familiarizes people with manifesto writing through template phrases drawn from current and historical examples and bold graphic design features. Finally, we position the Manifesto Machine as a thought probe for engaging CSCW 2018 participants in a manifesto writing challenge around new ways of co-existing and thriving together in the digital age.

Manifesto Writing and Collaboration

Manifestos are often used to circumvent formal processes and channels of governance, such as parliamentary or legal systems, articulating grievances while exposing broken promises, exclusions, and deferrals (not unlike social media) [7]. In this sense they resemble collaborative platforms and systems.

Increasingly, some academics seek not only to work from the outside, studying collective action, but also to

right-wing movements (Brexit, Trump), the moral to punch Nazis in the face, alternatives to violence that are 4. If we are living in a post-truth make progressive arguments and to a wide and diverse audience. 5. Arduinos and 3D printers are fascinating of what it means to be a human directly confronted.

Figure 3: Snapshot from Garnet Hertz's 'Disobedient Electronics' manifesto at <http://www.disobedientelectronics.com/>.

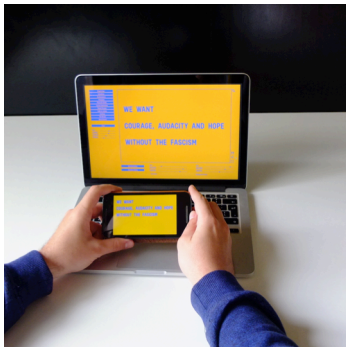


Figure 4: The Manifesto Machine collaborative writing environment.

work with (and from within) social movements. The manifesto, in contrast to the traditional academic paper, serves this purpose. It may be viewed as a gathering point, a collective canvas that crosses sectors and borders to promote positive collective action and resistance by prying open discursive and imaginative spaces and forcing new ideas into the public view. As Garnet Hertz states in his *Disobedient Electronics* manifesto: "If we are living in a post-truth time, we should focus on trying to make progressive arguments and facts more legible and engaging to a wide and diverse audience" [4].

In their argument for platform cooperativism, scholars and activists Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider posit that the source of platform capitalism's power is the culture or ecosystem built up by its corporations: "the festivals, the meetups, the memes, the manifestos—that share norms for what kinds of practices are expected and celebrated" [10]. Redefining and changing norms requires cultivation of an alternative discursive ecosystem to that of platform capitalism, which includes writing new manifestos. Scholz's essay-manifesto "Platform Cooperativism vs. the Sharing Economy" includes steps to action and manifesto-like declarations such as: "There isn't just one inevitable future of work. Let us apply the power of our technological imagination to practice forms of cooperation and collaboration" [9]. The alternative to an unacceptable status quo and the formation "Let us ..." are both classic hallmarks of the manifesto.

Another recent example is MIT Media Lab Director Joichi Ito's "Resisting Reduction" manifesto, which uses the form as a "seed essay" for gathering commentary [5]. New iterations have since been published that

incorporate feedback. Collaborative writing and transparency are two of the manifesto's best features—as is the use of provocation, gentle in this case, for starting (or continuing) a conversation.

The Manifesto Machine

The Manifesto Machine is a creative and collaborative environment that gives likeminded individuals the tools and inspiration to draft, design, and disseminate coherent and persuasive manifestos. We want to empower artists, activists and scholars to overcome barriers to participation (shyness, lack of knowledge, sense of authority) and discover the freedom-within-constraints that manifesto writing offers. Ultimately, we aim to deliver an end-to-end experience for learning about the manifesto form, browsing contemporary and historical examples, and offering a virtual space for designing and disseminating collaborative manifestos.

In the current iteration of the Manifesto Machine (Figs. 4, 5), phrases often used in manifestos appear in searchable drop-down lists, arranged by rhetorical category on the left of the canvas. The user can drag and drop text elements onto the canvas and position them as desired. Users can also free-type in the canvas, using sliders to choose from a curated selection of open-source fonts, and control size, leading, tracking, and kerning. There are additional options to randomly select, or reverse, complementary color schemes (with aesthetic choices extending to the entire interface, including control panels, to minimize distraction), and to save and share manifestos.

So far, we have worked with two different groups to explore manifesto writing: the first was part of a collaborative economy training school in November



Figure 5: Manifesto Machine drop-down lists, canvas, and controls.



Figure 6: Manifesto generated at the Collaborative Economy Training School writing workshop, Funchal, Portugal.

2017; more recently, we hosted a workshop in April 2018 involving university Design students. Both interventions resulted in insights - such as connecting users to their emotions, making visual impact, and the potential of the Manifesto Machine as an educational tool - that have informed or reinforced the design.

Integrated Demo Challenge and Conclusion

Manifestos are a form of public writing. They should be open, accessible, and collaborative - speaking clearly and generating discussion and debate. Thus, the aim of our demonstration and CSCW Manifesto Challenge is to explore manifesto writing with conference attendees around living and working together in the digital age. The Manifesto Machine, as it currently exists, offers opportunities for engaging conference goers with the aim of producing constructive interventions along the lines of Latour's Compositionist Manifesto and Ito's seed essay strategy.

The purpose of the demo is twofold: to gather data for further study; and to encourage attendees to articulate their ideas and document persuasive arguments while the conference is live, as well as providing a discursive space for making these statements visible beyond the life of the conference. Participants will be invited to experiment with the Manifesto Machine and compose short, provocative texts with bold visual appeal around the given topic. After saving their manifesto, participants can tweet the image via the Manifesto Machine Twitter account (@ManifestoMachi1) or from their own user account, with the conference hashtag and #CSCW2018ManifestoChallenge. The resulting effect will be a cumulative string of bold declarations arising from and reflecting conference discussions.

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