Northumbria Research Link

Reflecting on Collaborations with Charities in the Time of Covid-19
Angelika Strohmayer, Northumbria University

I have had many conversations with friends and colleagues who work with charities, libraries, and other organizations that support some of the most vulnerable people in society since the pandemic hit the U.K. a few months ago. As you might well be aware, these organizations are grappling with appropriate and timely responses to the developing global crisis. Many of us are thinking and talking about ways in which we, as researchers, practitioners, and people can support our research partners. This is while keeping in mind that staff in these services are working on overdrive at the moment, trying to keep up with ongoing changes to all of our lives while also maintaining contact with those whom they support.

Like many others, staff who support victim-survivors of domestic violence, those experiencing homelessness, families with children in care, people who are in addiction recovery, or others who may have various intersecting complex needs, are working from home. Many will have had to suspend the in-person drop-in services and pause ongoing group work programs they usually facilitate, and have worked hard to develop digital strategies to continue this vital support remotely. As technology researchers and designers, we may be uniquely placed to support organizations at a time when many are using digital technologies to carry out their work, often for the first time.

The research partners I have worked with are developing strategies in small teams and then sharing the learning across their wider organizations. They are making use of what's available to them: mobile phones, email, video calls, and free platforms that allow them to communicate with those they support. However, there is of course the issue that many of the people they support don't have access to reliable Internet connections, and that they may not have laptops, tablets, or smartphones—7 percent of households in the U.K. have no Internet access at all [1]. Some people supported by these organizations are now at greater risk of experiencing violence from their partners. Others may be at risk of perpetrating more violence toward their partners, as anxieties are on the rise and coupled with social distancing measures in response to the crisis; we know that natural disasters and diseases often lead to increased reports of domestic violence. Still others may not have homes at all in which to self-isolate and are instead sleeping rough or in overcrowded emergency accommodations. Despite these barriers, many people are working hard to stay in touch with those most vulnerable and those at greatest risk, often finding creative ways to do so.

From the conversations I've had with colleagues who regularly work in this space—and this may come as no surprise—I've learned that many of us want to help out. But I've also learned that we're not sure about how to best go about that.

We design technologies for a living and may have spent years working with partners to do research and develop innovative tools: We have some skills to share, and we care for our collaborators. At the same time, we must be conscious that even when we have good and longstanding relationships with nonprofits, libraries, and groups that support the vulnerable, we are not party to their crisis meetings and strategies. Nor are we necessarily looped in to their existing contingency planning, and we are likely to have only partial views of their service delivery.

Earlier in the pandemic, I talked to one of my collaborators who is in a managerial role of a national charity that supports women and children. This meeting had been organized to discuss a now paused project, but we decided to keep the time in our calendars. As we were about to end the meeting, I repeated that she should simply send anything that needed doing my way. Unexpectedly, she said that conversations like the one we had just had were very helpful. She then also thanked me for an invitation I had tentatively sent her on Twitter for a 20-minute session organized by fempower.tech (https://fempower.tech/) to find our inner calm. She had joined in the facilitated meditation session that morning, which provided her with a less anxious start to the day.

The video chat she had had with me and the 20 minutes of guided meditation were a starkly different kind of meeting from the other daily crisis updates, calls, and chats she has with the staff she supports. They were a relief from the anxiety caused by this ongoing pandemic. So maybe for now it is our role as researchers and designers not to *do* too much, but rather to acknowledge our partners' human needs and to support them in unconventional ways. One such way may be the simple act of inviting our collaborators to virtual hangouts—to encourage, promote, and enact compassionate and proactive solidarity; to offer a virtual cup of tea to them, just like they have offered so many physical cups of tea to us and those whom they support. These acts of kindness will not cure the stresses and tangible impacts of the pandemic, but they can be seen as part and parcel of what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has referred to as the care involved in the "layers of labour that *get us through the day*" [2].

HCI is an interdisciplinary field, one that lends itself nicely to building community across disciplines, forms of expertise, and types of organizations. We often draw on literatures from other disciplines, and are having more conversations about care work, collaboration, and social justice. All of these literatures can be useful for us now in these times of crisis.

For example, having conversations among ourselves as researchers to share experiences and ideas has been helpful for me to figure out how to best get in touch with those who have shared so much time with me over the years of doing research together. Formalized formats, such as the weekly webinars organized by NORTHLab at Northumbria University in the U.K., are a way of learning more about how research can be useful in this time of

uncertainty. But the much more informal conversations I have had during fempower.tech's Thursday digital tea breaks, or even the scheduled chats I've had with colleagues, have also been immensely helpful for me in getting to grips with what is going on, which has ultimately helped me make decisions about how I am able to lend a hand meaningfully.

This leads me to think about feminist notions of care, and the ways in which seemingly simple acts of checking in with one another, coming together for a weekly digital tea break, or genuine conversations about our own struggles can benefit us. And when we work with charities, NGOs, or other groups that support those whose vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by the crisis, we have the opportunity to put into practice our theoretical explorations of care in research collaborations.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa wrote in 2012 that "care obliges us to constant fostering, not only because it is in its very nature to be about mundane maintenance and repair, but because a world's degree of liability might well depend on the caring accomplished within it" [2]. The impacts of the pandemic on my friends and collaborators in charities has brought about entirely new meanings of Puig de la Bellacasa's thick descriptions of care for me. She continues the above, writing that "standing by the vital necessity of care means standing for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumental ones" [2]. If we claim to care about our research partners and those with whom we collaboratively produce technologies and perform research projects, we now must put in the work of enacting genuine solidarity and mutual support. More than perhaps before the pandemic, we have the opportunity to bring our whole identities into the collaborations, not just those parts of ourselves we see as our researcher-selves—to take up our responsibility as genuine and reciprocal collaborators.

We have the opportunity of working together toward better futures, to pragmatically enact those ethical commitments to care and mutual support that so many of us have written about. However, we must also acknowledge the care we need ourselves, not as researchers, but as people. At least for myself, talking with those outside academia about the issues we are facing, the constraints that are put on our lives and work due to social-distancing measures, and the ways in which this is affecting our own personal well-being has been helpful. And perhaps quite curiously, this reciprocal exchange about the devastation wrought by Covid-19 in two sectors, charities and academia, that were already in crises has left me more hopeful. As Joan Haran writes in the conclusion to her paper "Redefining Hope as Praxis," "We might consider our common vulnerability as a resource for the praxis of hope" [3]. Similarly, Puig de la Bellacasa ends her paper on thinking with care with the seemingly simple yet multilayered and complex question, *How are you doing?* [2].

I deeply appreciate that the ways in which the crisis we are living through is disproportionately impacting those who were already living in the worlds of injustice,

oppression, and inequities. I am in no doubt that the social and economic impacts of the pandemic will leave those who were already struggling in even more dire positions. Nonetheless, I want to end this article with those more hopeful messages that conversations with friends and collaborators and my readings of some of Puig de le Bellacasa's and Haran's work have allowed me to develop—that now, perhaps more so than previously, we must develop praxes of hope through thinking with care. Care for ourselves and for others. I will leave you with the words of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, which require us to think differently: "But though we do not know in advance what world is knocking, inquiring into *how* we can care will be required in how we will relate to the new" [2].

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

1. Office for National Statistics. *Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2019*. London. Retrieved May 8, 2020; https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2019
2. Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 'Nothing comes without its world': Thinking with care. *The Sociological Review 60*, 2 (2012), 197–216; https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x
3. Haran, J. Redefining hope as praxis. *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, 4 (2010), 393–408; https://doi.org/10.1080/14797581003765341

Angelika Strohmayer is an interdisciplinary technology researcher, working closely with third-sector organizations and other stakeholders to creatively integrate digital technologies in service delivery and advocacy work. She aims to work collaboratively on in-the-world projects that engage people at all stages of the research process to engender change toward a more just world. angelika.strohmayer@northumbria.ac.uk