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Sustainability, Hope, and Designerly Action in the Anthropocene

Roy Bendor, Delft University of Technology

Being optimistic is hard, and it seems to get harder by the day. Readers of this forum need no reminders, I'm sure, of the severity of our socio-environmental situation, and certainly have no use for platitudes about what needs to be done. As a community, we have been discussing such issues with regularity, on these pages and beyond. But since acting requires at least a reasonable expectation that the action will yield meaningful results, where does one find hope for change these days? How does one maintain, in the words of Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, an "optimism of the will" in the face of "the pessimism of the intellect"? And if, as environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben suggests, "[t]he arc of the physical universe appears to be short, and it bends toward heat" [1], how can a relatively small community of designers, researchers, and educators unbend said arc to help humanity avoid the worst consequences of life in the Anthropocene?

Hope that this is indeed possible motivated me to assume editorial stewardship of this forum. Although I now live in the Netherlands, almost 15 years on Canada's beautiful west coast have taught me something about the infectiousness of hope as it circulates among individuals and communities and binds them into a formidable force for change. Although the struggle over the future of the Athabasca tar sands and the pipelines designed to move their toxic product across the continent still rages, it has become clear that the struggle helped galvanize a small but hardened cross-sectoral community of activists, ready to fiercely oppose fossil-fuel politics as usual.

Can we learn something from the experience of water defenders, fossil-fuel resisters, and likeminded activists? I think so. The sustainability human-computer interaction (SHCI) community may be small, but we are not alone. Other design communities share our concerns. Even if sustainability itself may not be the main focus of work in areas like civic media design, speculative design, and critical making, the overlaps and potential synergies are hard to ignore. In them I find confidence that our community will continue to play an important role in forming and supporting cross-disciplinary networks for sustainability.

I also find hope in what I've learned from media and technology studies, namely that the full extent of designerly action is rarely foreseeable, and is likely to reach across space and time in unexpected yet impactful ways. In a wonderful piece for *The Guardian*, author Rebecca Solnit makes a similar point in the context of social activism, noting that the events we collectively call "the Arab Spring" were influenced by Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil disobedience, which, in turn, was inspired by Gandhi, who, in turn, was inspired by British suffragettes [2]. Simply

stated, we may know where our actions begin but not where they may end, whom they may touch, and how. It is here, Solnit writes, “in the premises that we don’t know what will happen,” that we may find radical hope and ample room to act:

Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists adopt the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterwards either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that meaningful action on climate change can wait, nor that we should abandon expectations of witnessing change in our lifetime. I firmly believe that there is ample value in pursuing small achievable tasks, but also that we will do well to resist the temptation to avoid the “big stuff” just because engaging with it opens us to uncertainty. There is room for both pragmatic action and big bold moves, and our community is capable of pursuing both.

While I am not a designer by education or trade, I have faith in the ability of designers to identify and pursue opportunities for meaningful social innovation and learning. I see this ability in my colleagues and in my students, and it inspires me. I want to suggest here that this ability rests on three important, trained sensitivities or qualities: the designer’s aptitude for dealing with complexity, for seeding futurity, and for activating users.

Dealing with complexity. Few issues are as frustratingly complex as sustainability, where social and material systems, nature, and culture are inextricably entangled, often with unanticipated consequences. The world, both science and our experience tell us, is brimming with emergent, nonlinear processes and hybrid phenomena that defy our need for certainty, predictability, and control. It is almost as if the more we know about the world, the less we are able to grasp it in its entirety. Finding sustainable solutions under such conditions calls for creativity and agility. If the domain represented by sustainability may be likened to a skein of yarn, it is one whose untangling requires a careful testing and pulling of its multiple, constituent filaments all at the same time.

Is there something specific that designers can do to help? I believe so. Many designers are trained to identify and make sense of complexity, to draw insights from diverse contexts, to find the commonality that binds seemingly disparate elements and locate them in ever-increasing networks of function, meaning, and value. In this sense, designers are trained to see the world as made up of human-

technology-environment assemblages. Can we build on and expand this trained sensitivity to complexity in order to help develop new models for understanding complex phenomena *through* design? Can we make use of design thinking (not to be confused with commodified Design Thinking) and proliferate the means to make sense of the world, while doing justice to its beautiful messiness?

Seeding futurity. From its very inception as a distinct social program in the report of the Brundtland Commission (1987), sustainability became synonymous with a persistent future orientation. This link has only grown stronger. In a world where intensity rules and short-term gains are *the* financial imperative, and yet, paradoxically, where a newly minted geological period reminds us that the accumulated impact of our actions will resonate long after we are gone [3], the importance of temporally recalibrating society cannot be overemphasized. As a society, we need to reform our relation to the future and find ways to pluralize and democratize it [4]. As exemplified by the growing volume of work that engages with the relations between design and futures [5], and that proliferates under a variety of headers—design fiction, speculative design, material speculation, experiential futures, and others—many designers are already committed to seeding futurity.

Eli Blevis, inspired by Tony Fry, suggests that design is “an act of choosing among or informing choices of future ways of being” [6]; and indeed, designers are trained to think about the future in very concrete ways. At the end of every concept, prototype, or iteration lies a distinct image of a future in which the designed object will be used and will become meaningful. But designers not only assume a future context in which their designed objects will be used; they also shape that future in and through their designs. To design is to deliver the future. Can such considerations serve not only to foresee and occupy some new market niche, but also to scaffold collective future-*making*? Can designers find new ways to help the public consider, experience, reflect on, and reshape sustainable futures?

Activating users. All this talk about complexity and futurity remains largely inconsequential if collectively we cannot or will not take meaningful action to make the world a better, more sustainable place. But any such action must also be measured, ethical, and strategic in scope; we have limited resources at our disposal, yet so much to do. This is where the rubber hits the road, so to speak, where the impact of design can be readily seen—where interaction can translate into material action in the world.

Designers certainly have the capacity to activate users by compelling, persuading, or otherwise scripting certain behaviors, even if not in all situations, and even if not with guaranteed success. Designers are also capable of promoting innovative ways of seeing and being that may evoke agency, and can help materialize the next

generation of tools for citizenship in support of those who are already actively resisting fossil capitalism. As we've seen in the featured Special Topic of 2018's first issue of *Interactions*, "Taking Action in a Changing World," HCI designers are already devising processes, platforms, and tools that may catalyze societal transitions toward sustainability. We need more examples to help us envision how to promote political self-efficacy, how to support participatory, equitable democratic practices, and how to expand the political imagination. Can we identify ways to activate individuals and communities without jeopardizing that which makes democracy worth protecting, that is, without bringing to life some grotesque version of a (more or less) benevolent eco-dictatorship?

In writing this brief editorial, I do not mean to establish strict categories for what the SHCI community should or should not be pursuing, nor do I want to preemptively police what should or should not be published on these pages. Since the capacity to determine which strategy will be most effective is often given only in hindsight, there is certainly room for a plurality of design and research activities. Yet, regardless of how we choose to frame our future contributions, I have no doubt that making an impact necessitates our continual seeking of productive dialogue and meaningful collaboration among ourselves and with others. We must seek allies and become allies to others. If sustainability is a "bigger than self" issue [7], we too should grow both internally (by adding members) and externally (by assuming our place within Third Wave HCI). In this spirit, I aim for this forum to continue to be an inviting space for dialogue, sharing, fostering a shared identity, and collaboratively preparing for the change that we must be. I encourage and welcome your contributions to this work. Together we can take part in the creation of a new civilizational story.

Endnotes

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3. Lewis, S.L., and Maslin, M.A. Defining the Anthropocene. *Nature* 519, 7542 (2015), 171–180.
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6. Blevis, E. Sustainable interaction design: Invention & disposal, renewal & reuse. *Proc. of CHI 2007*. ACM Press, New York, 2007, 503–512.

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Insights

- Designers can draw hope from the radical uncertainty that underlies designerly action.
- Designers possess specific skills and qualities that allow them to make meaningful contributions to sustainability.
- Continuous dialogue within and beyond our community is key to our capacity for making a difference.