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Making Civic Initiatives Last: Ecosystems, Technologies, Approaches and Challenges

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Abstract

Civic initiatives aim to create impact, often beyond the initial (design) activity or process. HCI practice and research has turned toward exploring methods, technologies, processes, to work toward lasting initiatives that can continue effectively beyond the project or grant timeline. Nonetheless, there is a growing need to create a forum where researchers and practitioners can share their approaches so as to shed light on opportunities and challenges of supporting lasting civic initiatives moving forward. This workshop aims to bring together researchers and practitioners interested in how to make civic initiatives have lasting impact: either by supporting and sustaining such initiatives or by focusing on how their outcomes increase people's capacity to act on their ideas and wishes.

Author Keywords

civic initiatives, sustainability, infrastructuring, participation, digital civics, participatory design, civic technologies, design methods, design tools.

CCS Concepts

•**Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design;** *Empirical studies in HCI;*

WORKSHOP GOALS
The workshop lasts a full day, split into two parts: (1) site visits in the city of Eindhoven and (2) a reflective session linking the site visits with the theories and cases brought in by participants using a participatory design format. These efforts aim to identify issues and opportunities for design, HCI, and other fields to do further work on sustaining citizen-driven initiatives. Concretely the outcomes will be a) matrix of similarities and differences between the case studies brought in b) an aggregated set of theory-informed insights by combining the perspectives of participants c) purposeful networking for the participants.

Introduction

In the last forty years, the impact of digital technologies have moved from professional, to personal, and societal contexts. This focus on societal contexts is evidenced, for example, by the rise of the term digital civics to designate the blend of citizen efforts and digital technologies, and their role in supporting relational models of organization and citizen empowerment. This focus is in line with recent interests in supporting lasting citizen initiatives (see e.g. [12]).

In this workshop, we respond to these recent trends and contribute shared discussions among practitioners and researchers on the ways in which digital technologies can support democracy and social organising. We critically inquire the lasting impacts of civic initiatives, such as issue-driven communities, grassroots initiatives, and co-governance arrangements between civil society and local institutions. How do we ensure that initiatives last beyond the time of a research grant or municipal project? What strategies can be applied to build long term capacity among people, enabling them to draw on networks, knowledge, project exemplars or toolkits? Researchers and practitioners are keenly aware of the importance of analytically investigating how collective engagements can develop over time [11] while enabling the conditions for those engagements to exist, with an emphasis in the long-term. Indeed, it is at the core of Participatory Design to be concerned with particular mechanisms and effects that lead to sustainable change [6].

A range of tools have been proposed, spanning from apps to digital platforms, as well as an emerging body of theoretical contributions, and a plethora of fascinating case studies. In the workshop, participants will bring examples of practice and research methods, tools, techniques which they perceive to be integral to the process of supporting sustainable implementations of democratic processes and forms of social organising.

Citizen Initiatives and Ecosystems

There has been growing research into how citizens can self-organise and effect change in their lives. Such work has gathered speed in the last decade in different related fields such as HCI, Participatory Design, justice-oriented interaction design, or urban and rural interaction design. Especially interesting themes for the purpose of this proposal are the organizational and relational arrangements among people and institutions (e.g. [8]) and the transformative potential of long term engagements.

The design and HCI community has a growing interest in enabling communities to participate in citizen initiatives, decision making, and local development projects. Such efforts emerge, for example, in the preservation of local heritage, culture, and identity [5]. Other domains of interest include rural areas, where the goal is to sustain design that emerges "from the rural" and participate in local issues that are often overlooked by policymakers in urban centres [7]. Particularly in rural areas, lasting engagements may also require processes and technologies that enable participation of locals who may not be geographically present, but remain to have a psychological connection with a locality (see e.g. [10]). In urban contexts, De Waal and De Lange discuss how novel technologies and digital platforms might support collaborative city-making [2]. A fundamental concern for longevity is understanding the impact that new technologies, processes, or structures may have on existing local dynamics[3].

Sustained engagement is one of the core issues in such research projects, and researchers and practitioners have identified key approaches, opportunities, and challenges for encouraging such engagement (see e.g. [12]). How-

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ever, it is of importance to look beyond individual projects, researchers, or participants and instead explore "broader ecological infrastructures that affect social issues" [4]. Looking towards approaches such as collective action, design publics [9] or a prefigurative politic may become useful here to form "effective alliances" [1] and draw on the resources offered by public or private actors; to subvert and act in opposition to the status quo. The goal of this workshop is to build on these discussions designed to make civic initiatives last, as well as to provide a forum for people to share experiences, challenges, and lessons learnt in order to consider steps forward for sustainable engagement of collectives.

Workshop Themes

To guide the discussions and begin to unravel ways in which digital technologies can support democracy and social organising over time, we have selected 5 themes, informed by the literature discussed in the introduction.

Tools and technologies
Designed technologies can empower people: for example, an app or game might help structure and organize citizen initiatives. At other times, tools and technologies may also be used in more distant ways, for example digital platforms to bring people together. What are the qualities of these developments and how can they empower citizens?

Roles and responsibilities
In this workshop, we are interested in the ecosystems that arise in citizen efforts, often involving a wide range of parties, individuals, and organizations. Because of this diversity, teamwork, and communication can be challenging. Questions arise, such as: what roles do stakeholders play in citizen initiatives? What are each of their responsibilities? How can we balance different roles, desires, and responsibilities in citizen initiatives?

Methods, approaches, processes and activities
Just designing a beautiful tool or technology and deploying it in its context does not guarantee its use. Without a suitable and clear process or activity, a tool or technology can easily fall short of living up to its promises. How can we develop tools and technologies that also deliver a fitting experience? Moreover, what processes could be applied that could increase the chances of lasting engagement?

Value and meaning
Next to tools, processes, and contextual knowledge, the initiatives and activities need to be valuable for the participants to join in in the first place. How is this value created? What does it mean to participate?

Processes to bridge the participation divide
Civic engagement is about promoting inclusion and infrastructuring opportunities for participation. However, citizen initiatives could end up being counter-productive if the resources required to participate are not equitably available[3]. How do we design, develop, and implement technologies and toolkits that promote the inclusion of alternative perspectives?

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