UnTechCon 1

An UnTech UnConference
by Geeks For Social Change

Documentation by honor ash
December 2022

GEEKS FOR
SOCIAL CHANGE

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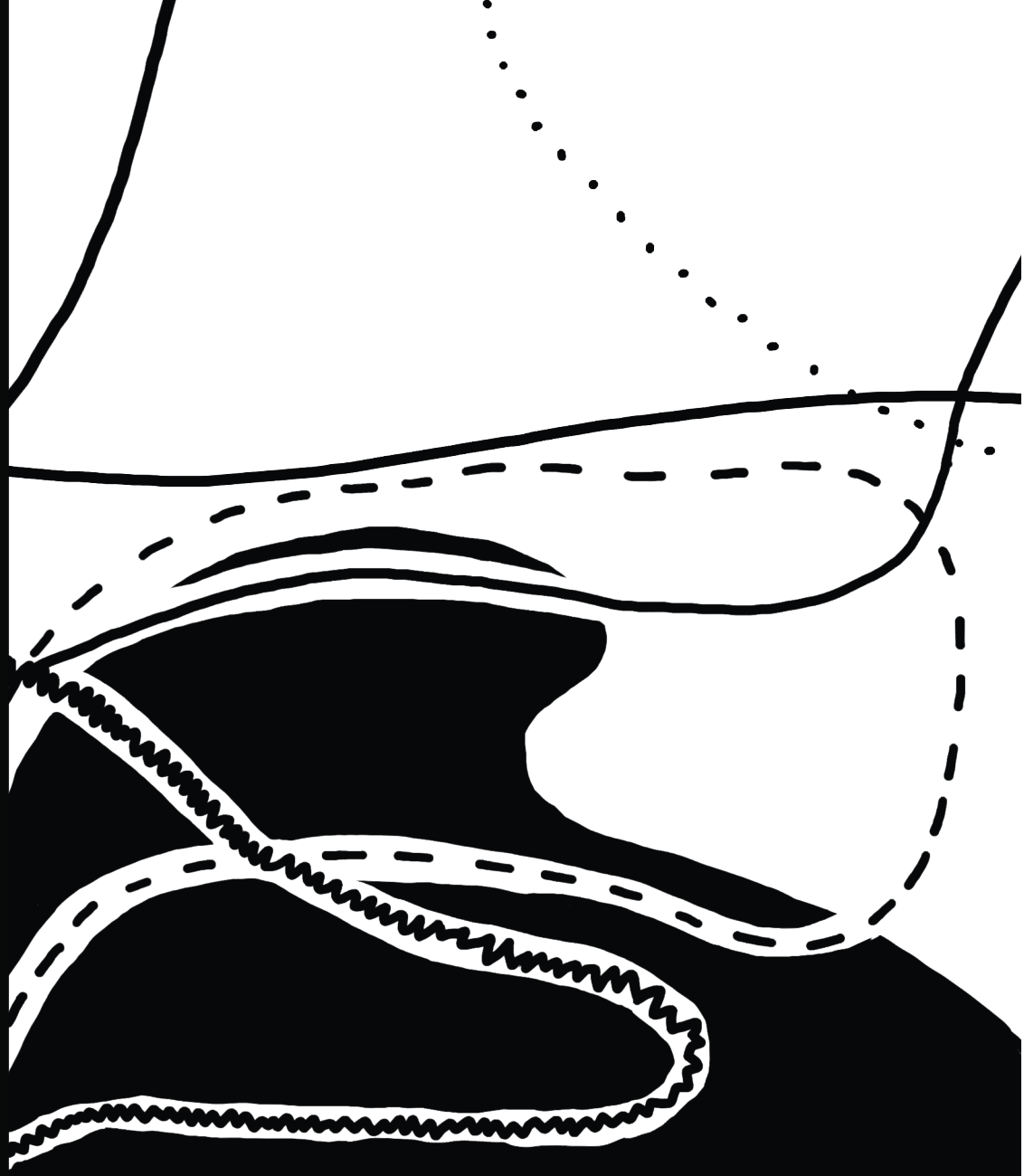

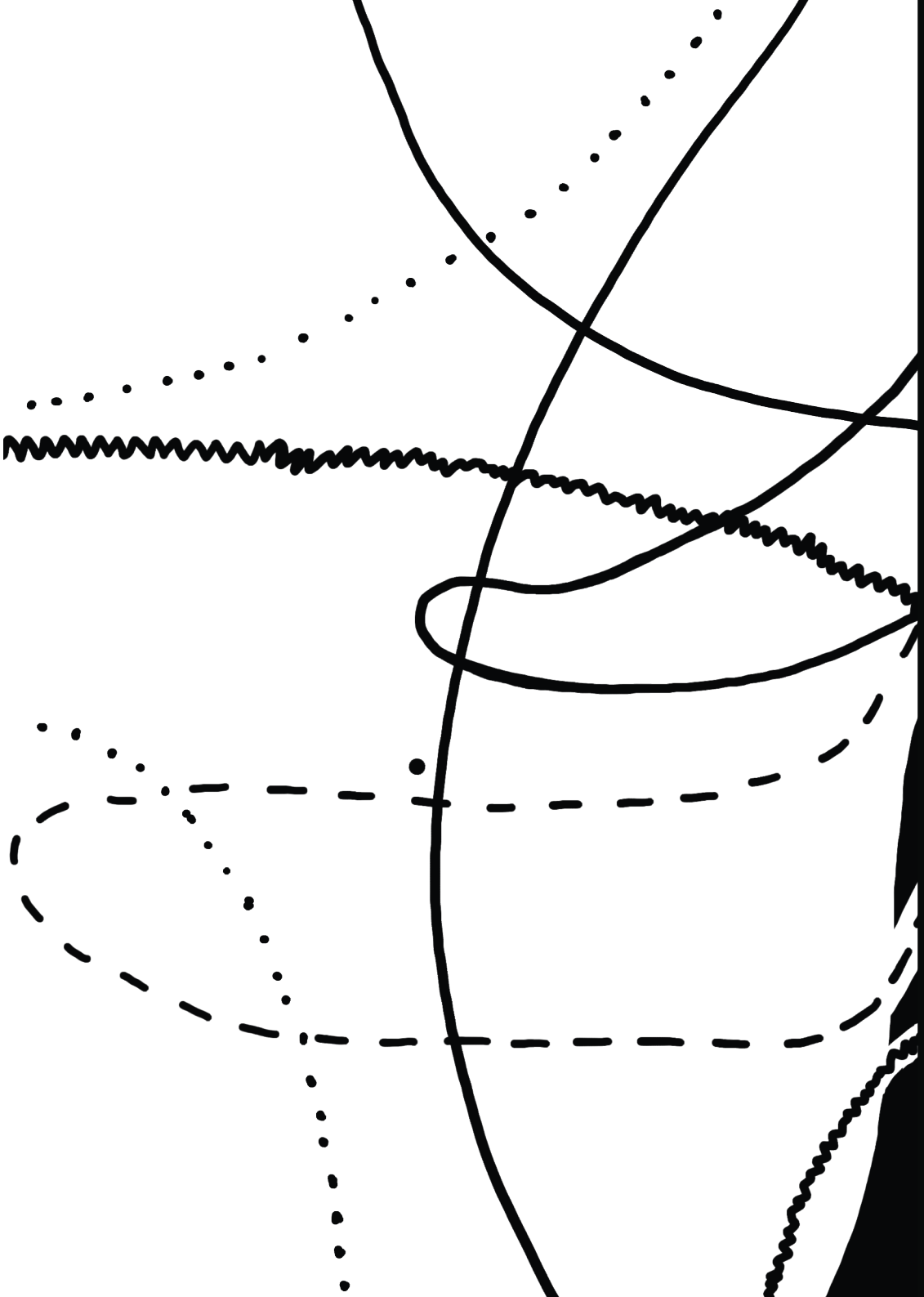

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What was UnTechCon 1?

UnTechCon 1 was the first UnTech UnConference organised by Geeks For Social Change. It took place on Discord on December 10th 2022.

What is an UnConference?

An UnConference is a conference where there's no preset agenda or speaker list under a loose overall theme. The lines between attendee and speaker are blurred and all attendees are encouraged to give talks, lead discussions, run workshops, etc, with the schedule open for anyone to place their own thing in. Attendees are also welcome to just listen if that's their jam, too.

What does UnTech mean?

We don't really know! We just found that anti-technology wasn't quite right as a lot of us really do like technology - just not when it's owned by global megacorporations to do evil things. UnTech therefore leaves the door open for creative interpretation whilst letting us be critical of how it's used in the world today.

Who are Geeks For Social Change?

We are a research and tech studio, who are interested in the gnarly challenges that present themselves where real-world, grassroots communities and technology collide. Our work began in Hulme, Manchester, but we now work across the UK with structurally disadvantaged groups.

Our approach differs from a lot of purported 'tech for good', in that we strive to be rooted in the communities we work with — and we do the work with, not just for them.

Our practice is rooted in community organising and development — projects centred around fighting state violence, supporting trans rights, widening accessibility, combating environmental harms, and exploring untold community histories (amongst many other things) are what get us excited.

As well as being a studio, GFSC is also a collective. The collective is made up of a diverse range of practitioners from many fields, with a shared interest in working towards positive and collaborative social change. Our focus is on helping each other to create socially impactful and useful tools for a better society, and having conversations about how tech can shape this work. During the pandemic, the collective struggled — as many other groups and organisations did — to maintain momentum and focus. Latterly, these exciting conversations have started to happen again, and it was in the collective that the idea of hosting UnTechCon was first floated.

There is a conflict in many organisations between boots-on-the-ground day-to-day material support and larger-scale advocacy and policy pushes which split demand for resources which are able to be secured.

A lot of activist organising reproduces what social services or the government should arguably provide.

A way to keep projects sustainable can be to have an end date in mind for those projects, or to imagine a future where that project or organisation won't be needed any more

Genuine interest factors in heavily to what people are willing to commit to in their free time, in terms of activism and causes.

Activism can be a space for experimentation towards finding out what could fix or help a given issue

UnTechCon 1 was an opportunity to expand horizons of interest and be open about unexpected influences on the work that Geeks For Social Change and its wider community does

Resources and links

Bidston Observatory (no date) BOARC | About. Available at: https://bidstonobservatory.org/

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Mermaids website (2022) Mermaids. Available at: https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/

Stonewall was a riot (no date) Stonewall Was A Riot. Available at: https://stonewallwasariot.co.uk/

Project prioritisation in activism

People who work in activist spaces often have to work 'day jobs' alongside their activist work

This can make it difficult to keep track of very complex or large projects

Activist work is often entirely unfunded, which is unsustainable

When activist work is funded, the needs, wants and desires of the funders can conflict with the aims of the work

The need for financial stability can get in the way of the work that needs to be done

Often, people working in activist spaces can have a resistance to thinking about raising money, however access to funds allows prefigurative living which affords space to consider the things which want to be achieved which are less fundable or sustainable.

Prefigurative ways of working embody the imagined or desired outcome of a group. Work which is prefigurative in nature will be compatible with the political outlook and aims of a project.

This might look like having a flat organisational structure for a group which doesn't think hierarchical ways of working are sustainable

There's little organised infrastructural provision in many areas of activism - for example there are two large trans charities in the UK, but not much else except voluntary mutual aid groups. These charities are restricted in their activity, because London is the only place which currently receives funding.

Even within what's able to be offered by larger charities, the fact that they are funded influences the work that they do.

Funding introduces a conflict in priorities - it has significant impacts on the ways work is able to happen - however it's often impossible to do that work without the resources of funding bodies.

What's this zine about?

This zine is the product of UnTechCon 1's documentation, compiled, analysed and edited by honor ash. It has a visual map showing the topics covered during the day, organised by loose themes, and each topic has its own page with a summary of what was discussed and links for further reading.

Facts and figures

46 people attended on Discord

There were 14 staff and volunteer moderators

71 people registered to attend through Eventbrite

Iffy Books in Philadelphia, PA, held an all day UnTechCon event in their space, showing the talks

There were 20 talks and sessions across two virtual stages

These attendees were made up of regulars in the Geeks For Social Change Discord community, as well as newcomers who entered into the space specifically for the event

The un-conference was hosted on Discord, and scheduling was handled using Google Jamboard. Notes were taken using Hedgedoc, and the planning and preparation took place on a combination of Discord, Zoom and Notion.

Some prospective attendees commented that Discord was an odd choice for an un-conference about tech, specifically one positioned as tech-critical (or at least tech-sceptical). The choice of software wasn't taken lightly - Discord was already the home of the Geeks For Social Change community, so many prospective attendees would already be familiar with the software. It was determined to be more stable than alternatives and with more inbuilt accessibility features. Discord was also able to support live captions using the SeaVoice bot for one of the stages, which was designated as the main stage and used for the majority of the event.

This documentation is being created in part to allow access to the topics discussed for those who might not have been able to access the event due to its taking place on Discord.

Feedback and reception

At the end of the day, feedback was collected anonymously from attendees and organisers, with everyone invited to contribute a **rose** (something you enjoyed), a **bud** (something that you'll take away or want to develop) and a **thorn** (something that could have gone better).

Roses

Subtitles! Yes!

Great to have such a receptive audience for ideas

I learned new things

So many different types of talks

Felt very supportive place for people to talk

Was great to hear responses from "experts" / experienced people on topics that I had only just begun engaging with

Hearing interesting ideas from lots of different perpspectives

Thought the overall structure and Jamboard worked really well

Such a friendly and non-intimidating discussion :)

Big range of tech 'ability' - ensuring knowledge shared wasn't exclusive to people with particular backgrounds, and felt comfortable to ask for clarifications

Discord worked well!

Friendly place to practice an off the cuff talk/try out unconferences

The separate documentation channel for collating links that don't get lost in amongst chat was helpful

Buds

Calendar tools, maybe. Surely there is a better way than someone manually adding individual events to a Google calendar

VERY MINOR: As someone who's tremendously foul-mouthed by default: Code of Conduct/ attendee info about expected degrees of cursing :D

I really like the idea of the online freshers' fair type thing for people to find local organisations, I might actually do that if I have the energy at some point

As an organiser, I was unsure whether to ask people to town down some language - so +1 to the clarification in expectations in CoC

As an organiser - would like to have got more people to speak and want to know if we can make this friendlier

+1

Would be cool to have a live text chat type unconference maybe?? I think a lot of people don't speak because they don't feel they have anything to add/came to learn

Resources and links

#GLITCHFEMINISM (no date) Legacy Russell. Available at: https://www.legacyrussell.com/GLITCHFEMINISM

The Allusionist (2022) Allusionist 129. sorry. Available at: https://www.theallusionist.org/allusionist/sorry

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Normalising and celebrating failure

Crowdsourced words to describe failure: shame, cringe, dread, frustration, humiliation, defeat, opportunity, embarrassment, oops, wasted time, loser, fail forward, humiliating.

Failure has different associations and implications depending on the kind of failure, and how public it is.

The cost of failure and experimentation can be less than the cost of formal education.

KPIs change how we feel about if a project succeeded or failed - what if we measured different things like 'number of things attempted' rather than 'profit'?

Organisations only have the language of money. Alternate metrics chosen to be the measure of success are often simply an analogue for money.

The space and time and funds to fail is a luxury I want for everyone - [a-z]

As adults, we're not afforded the opportunity to try a lot of things without pressure and fear of failure.

Working in DIY collectives can allow for a reframing of failure. Steps can be taken to lower the stakes to meet resources, which is more sustainable. Some organisations experience tension between accepting failure and working openly, and can be resistant.

Failure can be a radical act

Iteration and trying things are facilitated by allowing and accepting failure as part of that process. This iteration captures a childlike joy which is often not allowed for in contemporary society.

Failure in a digital space and failure in a local community context feel different - on a 'global stage' failure is terrifying! But in person, when people see that you've tried there's often a lot of humanity.

At the end of the discussion, the crowd submitted the following words to describe failure: humanising, tenacity, cheap, iteration, learning, forward, invention, humbling, experience, still embarrassment (but temporary and with good results).

Thorns

It's been mentioned but a better way to manage content warnings so they don't clash with the CoC. The spirit of the code is to keep people safe(ish) not to limit discussion

Learning Discord as we went was.... intense?

+1, bit more guidance would have been useful, as we went along if not before

Not all of the topics listed when the event was promoted were discussed. I had really wanted to learn about prison abolition

Clarity on whether or not we can share screens

There were more people in the morning

^ agree with this, great to say things you want people to come and talk about but not totally clear that due to 'unplanned' structure, lots of topics may not actually be covered

I think SOME talks should have been added before the day (but does that defeat the point of an uncon?)

A lack of tweets about the event

Breaks between talks

Maybe having types of slots would be better; sometimes I just wanted responses

+2

It's a long day! Would have preferred a half day (i.e. one session shorter) event with more use of both stages (so just afternoon, or morning and one afternoon session)

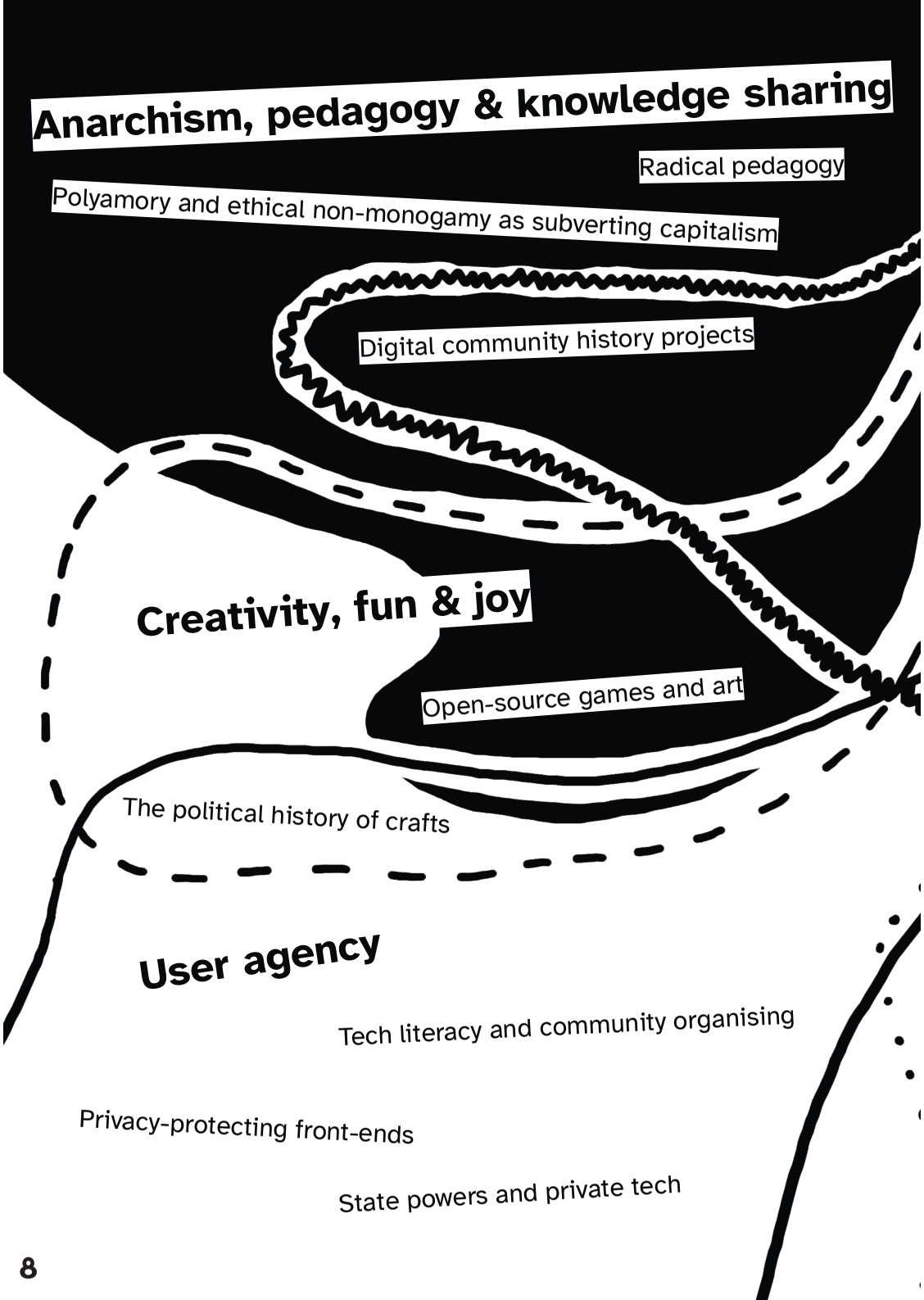
Was hoping for more of an interactive dialogue than just delivering rambling information during my talk (empathy for teachers rapidly developing)

Agree about shorter scheduling, I didn't want to miss anything but was flagging a bit towards the end

Agree: this morning I was thinking "do I really want to use my whole Saturday on an online event?" - glad I did in the end though!

This is a general online problem rather than this event specifically, but it's quite intimidating to give a talk to the dead silence of a virtual audience

Feel some of this may be down to being strangers to each other and breaking this ice a lot more difficult online



Resources and links

(no date) CoTech, Cooperative Technologists. Available at: https://www.coops.tech/

Barrington-Bush, L. (2014) The Constructive Radical's Guide to Organisational Change, openDemocracy. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/constructive-radicals-guide-to-organisational-change/

Inclusive Technology Consulting - bocoup (no date) RSS. Available at: https://bocoup.com/

New compass (no date) Radical Organizing in the 21st Century | New Compass. Available at: http://new-compass.net/articles/radical-organizing-21st-century

Ways to structure and create radical organisations

Sustainability and funding is one of the biggest barriers to creating radically structured organisations, because existing funding is concentrated at the top (a function of capitalism).

Some organisations have a 'Robin Hood' approach - accepting funding from big companies to redistribute to smaller and more radical projects and organisations - but many activists and participants in these projects are unhappy with accepting funding from these sources.

Co-operative organisational structures aren't inherently radical, but they can create circumstances for change to be created.

How do we create radical structures/dual-power/ 'ethical' companies under our current system?

Many activists struggle to find time to make change in the world, due to lack of agency over how they spend their time.

Communication burdens can be eased by creating spaces of 'outsourced responsibility' where others share the burden of the task to aid in both remembering and sharing the emotional load.

In Quaker churches a 'process of discernment' is used to make decisions as Quaker churches have no explicit leadership. They always seem to come to an agreement even when there are opposing viewpoints.

When creating community tech education projects, any approach taken needs to flex to meet the needs of those who are actually involved, rather than the ones who were imagined to get involved before the project started.

Often the work is to create a space to have room to do the things which create further change. A co-operative structure can create that space, but is not a solution.

Themes and Topics

Creating, sensing, and holding space

zone - a small, bespoke, unreliable virtual hangout space

Low-code practices for being on shared server space

Virtual communication with loved ones

Conceptualising data through dreams

Visualising organisational structures

Meeting mood

Sustainability and organising for change

Ways to structure and create radical organisations

Normalising and celebrating failure

Project prioritisation in activism

Radical pedagogy

Pedagogy refers to an exchange of knowledge, or teaching and learning

Learning and knowledge exchange which exists outside and in opposition to the institution of schooling can be described as radical pedagogy

Institutionalised schooling produces a demand for schools, lowering our desire to learn in any other way. Students who are taught in traditional schools which subscribe to the 'empty bucket' theory - that students are empty buckets waiting to be filled with knowledge by teachers - can find it hard to engage with learning in other ways. When moving into environments which require agency over the direction of learning, or to take initiative, students who have been conditioned to expect to be told exactly what to do or think can find it hard to think for themselves.

When working on a project, assessment and metrics of success can appear to be more important than the stated goal of the project itself. This kind of prioritisation of assessment shapes the way the project develops in the same way that learning to pass exams shapes the way learning takes place.

Competition is a disincentive to collaborative working.

If everyone is competing with each other, it means that working together is now negative, as that knowledge sharing gives an advantage to your competitors.

Individualisation under capitalism encourages a competition model in learning and in work - grades can be 'adjusted down on a curve' if everyone in the class does well, and stability in the form of promotions and monetary reward in traditional workplaces is treated as a competition between employees to see who 'deserves it' most.

To share knowledge openly is to disavow competitive thinking.

If institutionalised schooling disincentivises collaboration and learning to think independently, it follows that institutionalised schooling also creates the environment for people to put a lot of trust in authority figures without question. These authority figures might be media figures, or government officials. Radical pedagogy challenges the assumption that those in power should be unquestioningly followed.

Photos by Kelly Pimblott (top) and Jenna Bower (bottom)

From Manchester Community Histories in the Shadow of Urban Regeneration, GFSC blog

Digital Community History Projects

Digital community history projects translate space and time into a tangible exploration of those things.

This can come into play when a community is experiencing (or about to experience) a large change or loss, exploring connections between people and infrastructure, architecture and place.

As part of digital community history projects, qualitative research needs to be carried out with people who have direct experience of the topic being explored.

Qualitative interviewing can be challenging because it requires going into a period of research and not knowing what you'll get out of it.

Often projects will start by conceiving of a solution, and that solution will be what gets funded - rather than funding for a team to explore the best thing for the situation in which they're working.

Qualitative research can benefit from an imaginative and motivated approach to data gathering - maybe even an artistic impulse.

Resources and links

Foale, K. (2016) Data is meaningless without social power., Geeks for Social Change. Available at: https://gfsc.studio/2016/11/02/social-power-data.html

Pimblott, K. (2020) Manchester Community Histories in the Shadow of Urban Regeneration, Geeks for Social Change. Available at: https://gfsc.studio/2020/05/19/manchester-community-histories-urban-regeneration.html

Resources and links

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M., P. (1995) Bolo'Bolo. New York: Semiotext(e).

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Polyamory and Ethical Non-Monogamy as Subverting Capitalism

Polyamory and Ethical Non-Monogamy refers to romantic or sexual relationships which involve more people than one monogamous romantic or sexually active pair.

Polyamorous and ENM relationships:

exist outside of the traditional 'nuclear family' structure, which expects a closed heterosexual relationship which does not share the burden of housework, food and cooking, or childcare, other than with hired service workers.

could follow a number of structures or models, but the key feature they share is treating love and family not as a finite resource to be guarded jealously, but as an open or expansive force to be shared.

Nuclear families are more resource-intensive than polyamorous or collaborative communities which pool resources.

This is because each nuclear family unit which is untrusting of others in its community will seek to have its own store of tools and resources, which would in other circumstances be sufficient for a community much larger than said nuclear family unit.

This is a byproduct of capitalism, which wants us to buy more things so therefore isolates us from others.

A lot of polyamorous relationships aren't recognised by the state, because they challenge the nuclear family structure.

The nuclear family structure is supported by the state, because it assists capitalism in ensuring enough consumer demand for industry.

What would an anti-capitalist dating app look like?

Hierarchical non-monogamy can reflect power imbalances and uphold structures which are inherent to capitalism

Capitalism and the nuclear family is so baked into our culture, even things like our housing stock are insufficient for unconventional families or expanded living arrangements

While polyamory can be anti-capitalist, it isn't inherently

As a result of pervasive surveillance, we live in a time of *distributed policing* where borders are no longer just geographic, and enforcement of perceived law-breaking is assigned to members of society not traditionally involved in law enforcement.

This is largely as a result of Theresa May's 'hostile environment' which put responsibility onto people working in public and social services to monitor and report on immigration data.

Those tasked with this responsibility face criminal consequences themselves if they do not complete this - which results in charities, landlords, universities acting as border authorities.

Contributing to big data is not optional for members of the public, even if they have an understanding on how said data could be used against them.

Consider the push for everyone to install smart meters with no critical appraisal on what happens to the data they collect.

Often, technology which begins inert or for an objective good becomes repurposed or recontextualised to reinforce state power.

Buddi, a company which makes watches and fall alert devices for elderly people and has had Government contracts in telecare and assistive technology, also makes biometric tracking devices for 'offenders' and 'criminal migrants' for the Government.

Migrants are not criminal - they're *criminalised*, reinforced by algorithms.

Oppression and technology are often discussed as isolated acts, but can be contextualised as part of a wider pattern of behaviour which repeats neo-colonialism and white supremacy - choosing to move away however from framings of legality and illegality and instead to try and keep focus on harm.

Is this harmful? vs. Is this legal?

If there is harm, who suffers?

Resources and links

Yasmine Boudiaf's portfolio website. Available at: https://yasmine-boudiaf.com/

State powers and private tech

Historically and currently, state powers and private tech work together to oppress through the weaponisation of data.

Data, tracking, and algorithmic modelling can be used to dehumanise and criminalise people, especially from marginalised groups.

This replays ideas of physiognomy - where assumptions made about a person's morality or personality based on observed physical characteristics impact how they are treated.

IBM created software and technology for tracking marginalised groups during the holocaust, in apartheid South Africa, and are currently selling predictive policing software to policing groups, claiming to be able to predict crime before it happens.

Algorithmic policing is already impacting many peoples' opportunities in life - tons of data are collected, assumptions are made, and that data is weaponised against the people it was collected from.

Algorithmic policing reflects existing white supremacist structures where whiteness is seen as goodness, and racialised groups are criminalised.

Criminalisation is the process of being rendered criminal by dehumanisation and othering.

Tech solutionism refers to the notion that pervasive technology can be the solution to a particular problem - however often this implementation of technology can actually be harmful.

Tech solutionism is often employed in times of crisis.

We saw this during the COVID-19 pandemic where contracts were awarded without the usual due process in the belief they could help alleviate the pandemic somewhat.

Palantir was afforded a data analysis contract for £1 - following capitalism's own logic - where was the value in this for Palantir?

This contract was made available in a heavily redacted form, including the details on which data would be handled. The public do not have access to any agency or understanding of the deal which took place there, with their own data.

Resources and links

Drabek, M. (2019) Polyamory and neoliberalism, Base and Superstructure. Available at: https://baseandsuperstructure.com/polyamory-neoliberalism/

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Rosa, S.K. (2022) Challenging monogamy is a political act, Novara Media. Available at: https://novaramedia.com/2022/02/17/challenging-monogamy-is-a-political-act/

Conceptualising Data Through Dreams

Data can be defined as all of the moments and decisions which are stored about how we move through digital space, which collectively can come to define or shape who we are.

Dreams can be an analogue for our data if we consider:

We process our lived experiences in abstract through dreams. Data, as a collected archive, tells a story about us in abstract, which can be processed by us or others.

Dreams are very personal, so is our data. Our hopes, fears, wants and desires can appear in both.

Favourite songs, photos of loved ones, or written notes can appear in our collected personal data. When this data is stored by a third party, we no longer have agency over how it's used.

An example of this is someone who creates monthly playlists as a means of capturing the passage of time in an immensely personal way. If these are stored on Spotify, a third party service, Spotify could choose to change, delete, or sell said playlists at any time.

Spotify already uses this data extractively in Spotify Wrapped, which takes personal listening data and turns it into a self-perpetuating marketing tool

Data is EXTERNAL / CONTINGENT / P R E C A R I O U S

Like data:

Dreams are ephemeral, precarious, and out of our conscious control.

Dreams can be thought of as a rerouted relationship to ourselves.

We can use dreams to make sense of our 'waking' lives.

Dreams are a collection of parts of our lives shuffled out of order and made alien to us.

Data makes you vulnerable - it's valuable in its aggregate. Your data is only useful in its comparison to others.

When we share our dreams in writing, with friends, we might be converting our dreams into data. This could be seen as an intrusion of capitalism into our sleeping lives.

These tools could be useful for institutional internet providers, but only if users could opt-out of using them if they wanted or needed to

For example, a library which processes a lot of internet traffic could save on their internet usage by redirecting traffic to popular sites to privacy-protecting front-ends. They would need to make sure everyone using their services understood what was happening - the privacy-protecting front-ends look a little different to the usual site, and have limitations on features. It could be considered infringement on the library user's agency, even if the tool is implemented with good intentions.

Resources and links

LibRedirect - privacy-friendly redirector (no date) libredirect.github.io. Available at: https://libredirect.github.io/

Pluja (no date), A curated list of services and alternatives that respect your privacy because privacy matters. GitHub. Available at: https://github.com/pluja/awesome-privacy

Privacy-protecting front-ends

A way to access ‘big-tech’ websites with less tracking and fewer adverts

Read-only, meaning you can’t upload to a service using a privacy-protecting front-end, but you can look at things other people have uploaded

Accessed by replacing the url with one of an alternate front-end you know and trust

Not liked by some companies, who actively work to stop the use of them

Facebook/Meta shut down the Bibliogram front end for Instagram, and often change their API to stop people accessing their services without directly using their sites

Geeks For Social Change were working on a way to access Facebook events without using Facebook, but had to stop working on it due to the changes Facebook kept making to the way their services function

Alternative to things like VPNs (Virtual Personal Networks) or Pi-Hole, which can offer some of the same protection against adverts and tracking but are harder to use and have a cost barrier.

Browser extensions exist to easily redirect your traffic to your favourite front-end every time you click a link to a supported site

Some extensions can randomise which instance (server) your traffic is sent to, so no one front-end host ends up with all of your traffic instead (which would allow them to track your internet use, too)

It can help reduce the amount of data transferred when browsing, which can be useful to help speed up your internet connection, or save data if using a metered connection

According to whotracks.me, each pageload of Reddit collects 12.6MB of user data which would not be transferred using a privacy-protecting front-end, saving data, speeding up connection, and keeping your browsing information more private.

There’s no published record of what this data is collected for, exactly which data is collected, or who might be able to access it. By using a privacy-protecting front-end to access Reddit, a user regains agency over what is shared, and with whom.

Data is PERSONAL / SOCIAL / V U L N E R A B L E

Data follows the extractive logic of oil - like it’s a resource we can mine.

Data can be used to control.

Data is EXTRACTIVE / VIOLENT / P E R S I S T E N T

When you conceptualise of data in this simultaneously violent yet deeply personal manner, the decision of what to keep or delete becomes dramatised.

If you keep something, it could be extracted and used against you. If you delete something, you’ve lost something and it’s gone forever.

Our data increasingly deals with this emotional conundrum and feelings of loss.

Facebook hosts many profiles of deceased people, and even has a tool for you to choose what happens to your profile in the event of your death.

However, memorialising a Facebook profile does not remove Facebook’s access to your personal information.

Changing your email address can similarly trigger feelings of loss.

Resources and links

ash, honor (2022) should data expire? entropy and permanence in digital landscapes. Available at: https://hnr.fyi/should_data_expire.html

BRETON André Robert, Lane, H.R. and Seaver, R. (1974) Manifestoes of surrealism. translated from the French by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. (second printing.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hong, S.-ha (2020) Technologies of speculation: The limits of knowledge in a data-driven society. New York: New York University Press.

Ringmar, E. (2016) “Lucid dreams, Perfect nightmares: Consciousness, capitalism and our sleeping selves,” Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory, 17(3), pp. 355–362. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910x.2016.1217553.

zone - a small, bespoke, unreliable hangout space

A tool for spending time together online, designed to be an energetic way to share space virtually

Designed and created by the people it was created for

Meets the needs of the people who use it

Tools and software can really struggle to be used in ways they weren't necessarily designed for, but are technically capable of

zone uses YouTube to watch videos together in the space, which YouTube wasn't designed to support

If a user didn't create a tool, they can't be sure that tool will be able to handle the use case they imagine

Developers can't understand the full scope of potential use cases without doing research into the needs of users

If the developers are the users, or the users are the developers, tools like zone can be created - meeting the needs of the people who use it

Resources and links

Candle (no date) ZONE: an introduction to and history of our virtual hangout space, kool.tools. Available at: https://kool.tools/dump/ZONE%20ZINE.pdf

The Friendly Community where everyone builds the web (no date) Glitch. Available at: https://glitch.com/

kool.tools (no date) Candle's website. Available at: https://kool.tools/zone/about

The knowledge gap between those 'in' and those 'outside' of tech appears to be so wide, that it's hard for each group to understand how to resolve those differences and actually contribute meaningfully towards a resolution where tech actually listens to the solutions and issues those on the outside genuinely need, and those on the outside feel able to critique and communicate with those creating the tools in order to shape them to better serve their needs.

Tech literacy is very aligned with STEM in education, whereas cultural critique is taught as part of the humanities. This can lead to these topics being insulated from each other, and ineffective discourse between the two.

Resources and links

(no date) Cowley Club. Available at: https://cowley.club/

Creating digital gardens (no date) Are.na. Available at: https://www.are.na/annika-hansteen-izora/creating-digital-gardens

Digital Place for 4LL - cloud space (no date) Alternative and radical events agenda. Available at: https://radar.squat.net/en

Self-managed social centres in the United Kingdom (2022) Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-managed_social_centres_in_the_United_Kingdom

Tech literacy and community organising

There appears to be a prevalent attitude within tech that in a best-case scenario, there exists a technological solution to any problem. This attitude can also be referred to as 'tech-solutionism'

For people who aren't as tech-literate, it can seem like there aren't many choices or ways to resolve issues around community organising, because the solutions are only accessible to those with a certain level of 'insider' knowledge.

It can be difficult to find a connection between online activist groups and 'irl' activist groups, hard to access groups 'on the ground'

Having a limited online presence makes it both harder for bad actors to harrass you, and harder for like-minded people to hear about it and get involved.

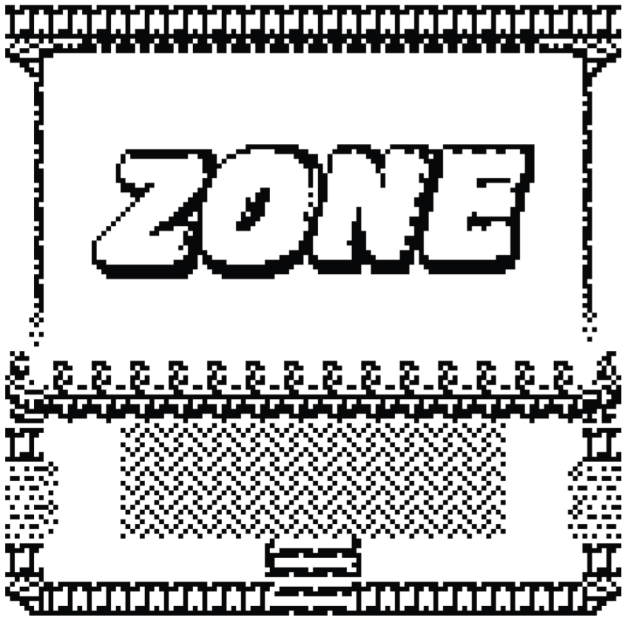
It can be dangerous for some groups to have any online presence at all, especially in more politically suppressed environments.

This can lead to a lot of different groups doing the same things without any cross-communication, due to the necessary lack of transparency.

There are a lot of people who don't want to be on Facebook, but feel like they have no choice because they need and want to know what's going on.

For groups who do feel confident in communicating using online platforms, they often use closed spaces ('walled gardens') such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. This can still be dangerous from a political point of view, as by using third-party platforms they do not have control over their data and what could be handed over to law enforcement, but is also ineffective from an organisational point of view as it amplifies the closed-circuit of lots of small groups which overlap in terms of interest, but do not interoperate.

Solutions exist which could allow groups to interoperate while also maintaining control of their own data, encrypting communications, and providing better resilience to bad actors - however those actually doing the organising on the ground are, more often than not, also outsiders to the tech community who have worked to implement these solutions.



Low-code practices for being on shared server space

Shared servers are computers which multiple people can access remotely

An example of a type of shared server is tilde servers, named after the '~' character which appears at the start of the command line

Shared servers will usually need to be accessed using the Secure Shell Protocol (SSH) and the command line interface (CLI)

This is a secure way of using the terminal to access a remote computer's filesystem

Using a CLI, you can make and edit files like you do when using any computer

avantwhatever.net is a group of coders and artists who undertake hosting as a creative and social practice. They have server residencies, where artists and coders can connect to their server, host web files, and otherwise explore the shared, virtual space

It can be hard to understand 'visiting' a server, or sharing a server space with someone else

Mateus (ghostglyph), who presented this topic, did a residency with avantwhatever.net. During their residency they developed a programme called Forest.

Forest tracks the changes of a file called 'campfire.txt' which people with access to the server can edit, and leave messages to each other

If nobody visits the campfire for a while, Forest creates lots of little tiny text files. They might be called things like 'leaf.txt' or 'branch.txt'

These little files might need to be cleared away, like you might cut back some branches which grew over a path you haven't used in a while in a real forest.

Resources and links

(no date) Rianna @vividfax. Available at: https://vividfax.github.io/

The anti-capitalist software license (no date) The Anti-Capitalist Software License. Available at: https://anticapitalist.software/

Indie Games on itch.io. Available at: https://itch.io/

Erbridge (no date) Erbridge/accssl: Anti-capitalist climate strike software licence, GitHub. Available at: https://github.com/erbridge/accssl

The Hippocratic License (no date) An Ethical License for Open Source. Available at: https://firstdonoharm.dev/

The useless web (no date) The Useless Web. Available at: https://theuselessweb.com/

Open-source games and art

Free and open-source tools play a big part in the conversation around financially sustainable creation.

While existing in a system which relies on monetary exchange, expecting unpaid labour from artists and creatives is unsustainable.

Economic sustainability exists in conflict with the material good of free, unrestricted access to art and education

A curated collection of resources is a way to share knowledge through games.

If we all had UBI and could just chill and make art, I don't think anyone would mind if other people used their art to make new art, I wouldn't anyway - [a-z]

Examples given for ways for artists and game makers to generate some income online include itch.io games bundles, commissions, and crowdfunding/ subscription services like Patreon.

Suggested donations are a way to raise funds at events, or in exchange for art and games, however this only usually raises small amounts of money which isn't suitable for long-term sustainability.

A robust welfare system can be seen as arts funding. By providing the necessary resources for artists to live without worry, they are free to use their time to contribute to artmaking and knowledge exchange

This doesn't just apply to the arts - if Universal Basic Income were in place we would be free to enact all sorts of community and self care which are inaccessible under the current economic model.

Monitoring and productivity are opposed forces, making workers (creative or not) feel pressured. There is a sense of expectation when creating art for an audience that you have to be productive all of the time.

There is a pervasive marketisation of creativity - everything creative has to be a side-hustle

Having to convince people what you're doing is Useful and has Measurable Impact is in opposition to creative experimentation without impetus to be productive.

Why can't we make and study things for the pure joy of it?

During the avantwhatever.net server residency I was thinking about ways of being present on the server, and the traces we leave in these spaces - so much is recorded in logs, and the spaces that as a user you might not usually visit. I have also been trying to think more about memory, and the different ways in which data is stored and retrieved. The process and energy of writing, erasing and rewriting a file feels interesting.

It is a strange project to leave running as it is unnecessarily generating files. It is performing computation. It feels like it is enough to look at this and think about it, without it actually running. By functioning though it can provide a space that becomes real for different people or at different times. You might encounter it accidentally. It becomes separate.

- Mateus

Resources and links

Avantwhatever.net Server Residencies (no date) Avantwhatever.net. Available at: https://avantwhatever.net/

Breadpunk (no date) BREADPUNK. Available at: https://breadpunk.club/

Domingos, M. (2022) Forest. Available at: https://bruise.in/forest.html

Tilde.institute (no date) Public-access OpenBSD system. Available at: https://tilde.institute/

Tilde.town (no date) tilde.town. Available at: http://tilde.town/

Tildeverse.org (no date) tildeverse. Available at: https://tildeverse.org/

Welcome to tilde.club (no date) Welcome to ~tilde.club~. Available at: https://tilde.club/

Virtual communication with loved ones

Staying in touch with friends and family can feel like admin or work when it uses the same tools that work uses

How could we reduce that pressure personally or by restructuring the ways we communicate?

Discord is a platform which can feel less pressured, but can have a high barrier to entry for older or less technologically literate people

UnTechCon 1 took place on Discord, which was a tricky decision!

Where are the community already? What tools do people already use, or have familiarity with?

Balancing the effectiveness of a tool to meet a need with the skills needed to access it

Video conferencing can provide an experience similar to meeting in person, but flattens conversations so only one person can speak at a time.

Meeting Mood (p. 24) is a tool which was also discussed at UnTechCon 1 and deals with this topic!

Marlene in the Geeks For Social Change collective is working on a website which will be a space for voice calls with a terminal-like interface which offers playful effects and tools for more engaged calls with loved ones

Communication burdens can be eased by creating spaces of 'outsourced responsibility' where others share the burden of the task to aid in both remembering and sharing the emotional load

Resources and links

An app can be a home-cooked meal (2020) Robin Sloan. Available at: https://www.robinsloan.com/notes/home-cooked-app/

Resources and links

Autonomic (no date) Autonomic Co-operative - How We Make Decisions. Available at: https://autonomic.zone/blog/how-we-make-decisions/

Consensus flowchart (no date) Seeds for Change. Available at: https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/consflow

Decide together (no date) Loomio. Available at: https://www.loomio.com/

Unity (no date) Consensus hand signals, The Unity Centre Glasgow. Available at: https://unitycentreglasgow.org/consensus-hand-signals/

Meeting Mood - Distributed consensus hand signals. Available at: https://meeting-mood.wheresalice.info/

Slido. Available at: https://www.slido.com/

Meeting Mood

Reaching consensus in online spaces can be difficult, which means digital meeting attendees have less agency over the outcome or direction of a specific meeting or consultation.

Meeting Mood is a tool which was designed to help bridge this gap.

Meeting Mood builds consensus by displaying a real time poll of all participants in a call, showing you what they're thinking.

In Meeting Mood, you can pick from a range of options to express how you feel about what's being spoken about. This might be 'speed up' 'slow down', 'agree', 'disagree', or 'veto', when watching a presentation or participating in a consensus building activity, like a vote or poll.

In-person meetings allow for communication through bodily movements, e.g. hand signals. Meeting Mood aims to fill the gap in online spaces where bodily gestures might not be appropriate or possible.

Digital and online tools have an advantage of not needing to use the voice to communicate if that's not the preferred mode of communication of the user.

Often the tools asked to be used for a certain task (e.g. online education) are not suitable for the realities of that task

For example, in a large meeting where everyone has their cameras and mics off, there are limited ways to generate real-time feedback to check in if everyone understands. One way this can be worked around is to use the meeting software to generate a notification or noise - (e.g. 'raising their hand') to generate quick and simple audio feedback.

It's hard to quickly get feedback on if everyone is happy with the speed, direction, or outcome of a certain idea due to the reluctance to turn microphones on. In person, it might be appropriate to gesture physically, or make a small utterance, but online that derails the focus of everyone in the call due to the flattening effect of video calling software.

Tools like Meeting Mood can benefit autistic people by making the nature of consensus building explicit.

How do you communicate being in the space when using digital tools (which are disembodied)?

The political history of crafts

The Jacquard loom was made working with the people who would use it, not by a lone genius disrupting the weaving industry. This history is often ignored when the loom itself is discussed.

The silk weavers in Lyon owned their tools, and organised in ways which resemble unions.

Craft is still present in factories, which ties craft explicitly to the labour movement.

Often the politics of crafts are dismissed in favour of purely aesthetic consideration.

There is a craftsmanship around coding, and coding can be considered related to craft and production of artisinal goods in this way, especially when done by hand.

Resources and links

Nick Heath and Spikymike (no date) The French Silk Workers Revolt, 1834, libcom.org. Available at: https://libcom.org/article/french-silk-workers-revolt-1834

Crichton, D. (2018) Programming as craft, TechCrunch. Available at: https://techcrunch.com/2018/02/24/programming-as-craft/

Itallie, M.V. (2022) Code is a craft, not a competition – and why it matters., DEV Community. Available at: https://dev.to/this-is-learning/code-is-a-craft-not-a-competition-and-why-it-matters-f3o

Jacquard machine (2022) Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacquard_machine

Software craftsmanship (2022) Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_craftsmanship

Visualising organisational structures

Most organisations have a very opaque structure, which can make effectively working with them difficult

It might not be clear which responsibilities are dealt with by which which members of the organisation

This can lead to repeated work, and an implicit structure which is felt over time rather than explicitly communicated and able to be referred back to

There are plenty of tools which can allow for visual collaborative diagrams to be created.

Miro seems to have the best combination of features and ease of use for tasks like this, as it allows for files to be directly uploaded to it in order to have no disconnect between the visual structure and the actual work done by the teams or individuals mentioned on the structural diagram

Miro is a large company and it's not very transparent how or where data uploaded to it is stored, how secure it is, or who might be able to access it.

Many of the possible alternatives are either less easy to use and implement, or lack features that make Miro desirable.

Clearly visualised structures can be immensely useful, but they can also be uncomfortable in activist spaces when used to explicitly map the relationships between people.

It doesn't seem very common to spend a lot of time thinking about the best ways to communicate organisational structure.

Organisations often treat structural knowledge as known but implicit, so store this information anyway in ways which are implied, hard to work with, and possibly more insecure.

Resources and links

Collaborative whiteboarding made easy, Excalidraw. Available at: https://excalidraw.com/

Common.Garden. Available at: https://common.garden/

Luma workplace. Available at: https://www.lumaworkplace.com/sign-in

Mermaid. Available at: https://mermaid.js.org/#/

Miro. Available at: https://miro.com/

Mural. Available at: https://www.mural.co/