Leanne Suen Fa

CART360

Critical Reflection 1

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About Utopian Feminist futures

In "Hackathons as Participatory Design: Iterating Feminist Utopias", Hope et al. present hackathons based on utopianism to help guide the participants into envisioning new ways to address complex social issues at a large scale. As such, they place the inclusion of racially and sexually diverse parents in the discussion around improving access to breastfeeding as key to the achievement of this vision. However, the utopian vision the authors are presenting throughout the article is not only imbued in white privilege but also in americentrism resulting in very low expectations of the utopian world they imagine.

The overall goal of the "Make the breast pump not suck" series of hackathons was to increase the rates of breastfeeding. During the first iteration of the event, the participants were mainly "parents, designers, engineers, lactation consultants, midwives and doctors". Therefore, at the end of the event, they came to the realization that the designs produced mainly reflected the needs of white, well-educated white-collared workers with health insurance and disposable income. Still, the first hackathon later resulted in the commercialisation of over 5 new breast pumps. Thus, for the second event, extra efforts were done to find "the marginal user", participants from diverse ethnic, financial backgrounds and sexual orientation. Unlike the first hackathon which focused more on the product, the second one focused on understanding the experiences of the participants, encouraging learning and sharing and supporting the initiatives which would come out. One interesting aspect of the second hackathon was the effort to change policies around paid maternity leave as it was a point which had nothing to do with breast pumps but is so very relevant to making breastfeeding more accessible to the American population. Moreover, they encouraged low-tech and no-tech solutions during the hackathon as unlike the techno-heroic narrative which is the usual norm at hackathons, technology is not always the best solution to every problem. They conclude that "imagining future utopias is a process, not a destination" and as such, relationships between stakeholders, community members and participants must grow with time (Hope et al.).

According to UNICEF's report on breastfeeding from 2018, the rate of breastfeeding is lower in high-income countries than in low and middle-income countries. More than 20% of infants are never breast-fed in high-income countries whereas almost all infants are breastfed in low and middle-income countries. 1 in 4 babies has never been breastfed in the U.S., the third lowest percentage among high-income countries. The UNICEF report echoes the findings from the hackathon that it is mostly "mothers from poorer households [who] are less likely to breastfeed" in high-income countries (*Breastfeeding : A Mother's Gift, for Every Child*). Another report from UNICEF on family-friendly policies from 2019 ranks the U.S. last among all OECD countries as it is the only country which does not offer statutory paid maternity leave. The report also found that rates of breastfeeding among infants would then drop by half from 49% to 27% between the age of 6 months to 12 months (Chzhen et al.) while the recommended duration of breastfeeding is 2 years (*Breastfeeding : A Mother's Gift, for Every Child*).

The statistics very obviously show that the U.S need to catch up to other countries and offer better workplace conditions as a public health priority. Framing the need for better policies as being part of a utopian feminist future while on the international scene, all other similarly high-income countries have set up better family-friendly policies muffles the injustice and discriminatory practices which have become the norm in the U.S. It sets the expectations for basic human rights so low that it feels that the hackathon participant's desire to improve local policies is almost fantastical and idealistic. Therefore, although it can be a good brainstorming prompt to imagine how things could be done differently in an ideal world without constraints, the organisers of the hackathon should put more care into what they frame and define as being utopian. The lack of awareness towards efforts from other countries to provide family-friendly gives the feeling that the vision of the hackathon tends to be americentric as if straying away from the American norm would lead to utopia rather than towards finally reaching the standards set by other countries. Data surrounding economic inequalities and breastfeeding rates can actually be so easily found through a simple research online, that it is also surprising that the first hackathon's organisation was carried out oblivious of user experience research to find out what were the actual barriers to breastfeeding. It is such that the article ultimately appears to be a tale of the discovery of self-awareness of white privilege by a bunch of white researchers from MIT and their efforts to learn more about the struggles of people of colour, members of the LBGTQ community, all belonging to lower economic classes than the researchers.

The "Make the breast pump not suck" hackathon series could be contrasted with the open source automated insulin delivery system which stemmed from the grassroots online global community #wearenotwaiting (Braune et al.). The dream of the DIY artificial pancreas has been shared by many people and parents of people suffering from type I diabetes for years and this community came together to work on a solution to improve their quality of life as they could not find a product from the pharmaceutical industry which fitted their needs. Very recently an article was published in the world-famous New England Journal of Medicine reported that the open-source automatic insulin delivery system was significantly more effective at controlling blood sugar than sensor-augmented insulin pumps (Burnside et al.). Although it is not officially approved by the FDA yet, it is a big step forward, rewarding the efforts of the community behind it. I would consider this kind of initiative to actually be defined as utopian but the "Make the breast pump not suck" hackathon is not there yet.

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