Does (social) design care…?

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Abstract

Recently, several news media reported an unusual circumstance where 70 to 80 strangers formed a 'human chain' from the shore to reach a family stuck in a rip current in the sea, in Florida (U.S.A.). Although we are all living in a sea of information and social networks, many of us are also stuck in currents of loneliness and despair while consuming irresponsibly on the one planet we share. If the future is to last forever how can design take care of it? Can the design of social networks enhance care? In a world where everything is connected and some people are lonelier than ever, the design of things and services should enhance social networking in both virtual and physical spaces, for example in the international trend of repair and calibrate workshops. Furthermore, we also need novel legislation that benefits the act of repairing, thus preventing waste and promoting possible and responsible lifestyles for (designed) things and people of the 21st century.

Introduction

Recently, at Panama City Beach in Florida (U.S.A.), several news and social media reported an unusual circumstance where 70 to 80 strangers formed a 'human chain' from the shore to reach a family of nine people stuck in a rip current in the sea. While police and parametrics waited for a boat to rescue the group in danger, several '…people watching from the shore decided to take matters into their own hands,' thus forming a chain and facing strong waves, '…all holding hands and stretching to reach the trapped group.' At the end, after saving the family that included several young kids, '…they all started clapping and cheering because they were so happy over the fact that [they] accomplished it.' The mother of the saved family would later say "[a]s a mama, I'm supposed to be able to protect them and do everything, and I couldn't do it that day (…) I had to have help, which I was eternally grateful for that." (Moshtaghian and Coleman, July 12 2017).

In the following paragraphs we compare the experience of digital media with a flow of water, following the essay 'Tarzans in the Media Forest' by Toyo Ito, from 1997. Then we argue that nowadays the design of things and services should enhance social networking in both virtual and physical spaces. Finally, we highlight the international trend of 'repair and calibrate workshops', and we also mention new legislation in Sweden that benefits the responsible act of repairing to prevent waste.

In the Sea of Information (and Waste)
In the essay 'Tarzans in the Media Forest' , the Japanese architect by Toyo Ito (1997) describes a conversation with a graphic designer Asahi Shimbun, who '… has the odd sensation that part of his body starts to flow into the screen whenever he sits at a computer. (…) As we step into their world, as the designer says, "a strangely comfortable sensation surges up inside me". And he goes on, "when I am sitting at a computer, I feel like I'm wading in the water's edge, that I am being linked with another world" '(1997, pp. 118-119).

Ito (1997) reflects about the ' …serious question [posed by Shimbun] when he says, "just as water makes us realise that a human being is part of a greater nature, electronic media may modify or change the meaning or boundary of a human being, especially of the individual". By entering into the computer screen, he became aware of the possibility of orienting the self toward the outside, a self that used to be excessively introverted. In other words, recognising the flow of electronic media inside him made him realise once again that the human body is part of nature (1997, p. 119).

Still far from the social networks development, but already in full bloom of the proliferation of electronic devices as mass consumption products, Ito (1997, p. 121) adds that '[e]lectronic devices such as personal computers, fax machines, mobile phones and car navigation systems alter our physical sense from day to day'. And particularly referring to the younger generations of high-school students (and most probably only in Japan at that time), Ito writes '[m]obile phones are an essential tool for today's high-school students. They carry them wherever they go and are constantly communicating with their peers. For them, talking with their friends over the mobile telephone is like chewing gum.' Ito highlights that [b]y hearing the voices of their friends at all times, they seek to

avoid being left alone. Their bodies crave the flow of electrons just as hey nee water and air' (1997, p. 121).

Nowadays, the use of electronic devices is expanding worldwide. More than 1.4 billion smartphones and 268 million tablets were connected by 2013, and the number of IP-connected devices is expected to reach 50 billion by 2020 (a ratio of more than 6:1 with human beings), thus enhancing connectivity between people, processes, data and things, in what is currently called the Internet of Things (IoT) (see Henriques 2014, 2013). Nonetheless, many people highly connected on this sea of information are not only feeling lonelier than ever, but also consuming irresponsibly, considering the planet Earth's resources: the data generated in the networks, only now possible through the number of connected devices worldwide, has given rise to a new data economy that substitute the previous oil economy (The Economist May 6 2017). And this new economy has also given rise to a tremendous generation of electronic waste, both inland and in the seas: the results are everywhere.

Caring for the Present and Future Generations
Following the 'Does Design Care…?' Workshop call, and particularly the 'Problem 9. Care needs to take as much care as possible…', we try to show that '[d]espite all the energy and effort thrown at sustaining life on the one planet we share, now all we can do is constantly recalibrate downward earth's carrying capacity.' In parallel to this new data economy, a novel international trend of repair and calibrate workshops, cafes, and so forth can do this. We believe that it can bring a new dimension of care for the (designed) connected things. And it can bring also a calibration for social design: connecting in physical spaces distinct generations stuck in currents of loneliness and despair, both the ageing and the booming… It would be interesting to observe if this could enhance new creativity flows as well (see for example Rodgers and Jones 2017 for an intergenerational study in higher education).

Furthermore, some exceptional new legislation that aims to give tax breaks for repairs in Sweden (for more information see Orange 2016), might bring new hope for the present and future generations, thus preventing waste and promoting possible and responsible lifestyles for (designed) things and people of the 21st century.

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