Introducing Everyday Futures as a New Interdisciplinary Area of Research

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With the rise of ubiquitous computing, the role of HCI and interaction design in making everyday futures is becoming ever more encompassing and profound. The articles in this Special Topic offer some thought provoking perspectives on how these implications might be researched, understood, and challenged.

Future everyday life is certain to be different from today, but how is it shaped in the present? What role do technologies and interaction designers have in shaping everyday futures? How might futures be made differently, and what theories and methods would be required to do this? These were questions that brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers to form the Everyday Futures Network (wp.lancs.ac.uk/everydayfutures) in July 2016 The network was founded with the conviction that Everyday Futures is an area ripe for development, tackling head-on the fact that futures of work, future homes, city futures and energy futures all make assumptions about, and have far reaching implications for everyday lives that are seldom explored.. An inaugural workshop was held at Lancaster University's Institute for Social Futures (www.lancaster.ac.uk/social-futures), an initiative which aims to make better futures in which the experience of being human on a finite planet is made central.

The workshop foregrounded the kinds of methods and analysis available across the disciplines, to develop everyday futures, a topic which currently slips between the disciplinary cracks. History, sociology and anthropology, though dealing with the lived everyday do not tend to engage with the future, while disciplines such as policy, planning, fashion, and interaction design focus on the future, through various objects and scales, but rarely from the perspective of everyday life. The workshop established an active and engaged network – with a growing membership from a wide variety of backgrounds, and produced a collection of nine essays. This collection lays the foundations for an original research agenda, and is freely available online through wp.lancs.ac.uk/everydayfutures/essay-collection/.

The four articles in this Special Topic are based on a selection of essays from this collection. We have worked with the authors, who are from history, design, sociology, environment, management and policy to tailor their contributions for HCI researchers and interaction designers. As such, the essays provide gateways to other realms of knowledge, approaches and perspectives. In the rest of this introduction, we briefly position Everyday Futures as a new interdisciplinary area of research, and invite you to join us in this emerging agenda. Indeed, the future is already central within HCI research, however, it is primarily approached from the perspective of particular technologies. We therefore begin by highlighting three perspectives on 'the future' that are intertwined in the articles that follow: researching past futures; identifying traces of the future in the present; and, exploring the assumptions about everyday lives that are embedded in future visions. These perspectives are valuable for the new light they shed on technologies in everyday life, and therefore by implication the roles that HCI researchers and interaction designers might play in shaping everyday futures.

A historical focus, such as that explored by Wright and Pooley, highlights that new technologies do not enter a vacuum, but rather that they become woven into everyday lives, relationships and ways of doing that already exist and work. In this light, it is no wonder that technologies have unanticipated effects. Looking in detail at past ways of living and working can provide new understandings of the present, and on why interventions (including technologies) have unexpected outcomes.

Secondly, viewing the future as performed in the present – which is the focus of Chatterton and Newmarch – highlights the diversity of ways of living that exists alongside each other at any moment in time, between different cultures and social groups. They argue that some parts of society, including technology designers and researchers, have more power than others to decide the types of futures that get promoted and prioritized, and reflect on how HCI might reproduce, but also challenge such undesirable patterns. One way of achieving this might be through using new methods to make future imaginaries and visions. As Wright and Pooley note, imaginaries do not simply materialize as envisioned, but they are nevertheless powerful devices for change. Which points to the third perspective.

This third theme is the focus of Welch, Keller and Mandich, who point out that all too often future visions – like the circular economy – brush over the changed everyday lives essential to their realisation. In the article, they show how social theories can help to unpick the relations between everyday life and technology in large scale future visions. Complementing this, Meadows and Kouw offer a method for developing multiple visions of a better everyday future, which they call collective composition, emphasising plurality and potentially conflicting ideas of 'the good life', rather than seeking a consensus.

The main aim of this special topic is to open up the area of Everyday Futures as new ground to explore between disciplines. Though they are far from being the final word, we believe the articles offer some compelling new perspectives for HCI research and interaction design. This Special Topic forms an invitation to the Interactions readership to join us in pursuit of a better understanding of the impact of new technologies on future everyday lives, and to reflect on how, through research and design, they might contribute to futures that are more equitable and sustainable.

Those interested can join the network by subscribing to the email list on the website (wp.lancs.ac.uk/everydayfutures), and join conversations with #Everydayfuture. We are currently organising a second workshop on 'Making Everyday Futures' to be held in July 2017 at the Department of Industrial Design of the University of Eindhoven, the Netherlands. The aim of the workshop is to experience the making and deployment of artefacts as a way of exploring and questioning future everyday life. More details about this workshop, and how to participate will become available on the website.