**Reflecting on the design-culture connection in HCI and HCI4D apropos of Interact 2017 Field Trips**

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In this blog entry we provide our own personal reflection as a consequence of being asked to organise the ‘field trip’ tracks for the Interact Conference in Mumbai. We knew trips would lead those engaged with them in a necessary journey to look at the multiple, often contested, connections between culture and the process and product of designing technology for people. Side stepping postcolonial pitfalls, we hoped the field trip track would facilitate the translation of local knowledge into valid and useful design insights re-defining and re-negotiating boundaries and relations between product and user. After all, engaging with indigenous awareness in the course of field trips should lead to interesting realizations for the ontological and epistemological assumptions of what constitutes useful, usable and, importantly, meaningful design. These realizations from the field are also configured by the different worlds and traditions we have grown in and up. Rather than feeling, drawing from a positivist epistemology, that we are not being truthful or valid by allowing to ‘contaminate’ our experience of the other with that of ourselves, this should instead be embraced, capitalizing on the rich phenomenological encounters afforded by the fieldtrips. It goes without saying a good chunk of our job as designers and researchers is to empathize and find new meanings and connections into existing things, objects and practices to innovate and make life better in whichever material and experiential ways possible. The best way to do this, to our knowledge, is to merge and collide viewpoints, traditions and ways of thinking; to provoke situations of breakdown in a Heideggerian sense, where established and often tacit values and knowledge become ‘present at hand’, coming to light in order to do something with or about them.

Field trips in India were a unique opportunity for these breakdowns to occur in the crossing of traditions spawned by the inter-meshing of the diverse external delegates and researchers with local communities. In the words of Professor R.K. Mukherjee: “India is a museum of cults and customs, creeds and cultures, faiths and tongues, racial types and social systems” [1], and field trips opened up the opportunity to discover and reflect on cultural spaces without having to rely on ready-made Hofstedian’s national cultural models, out of which so many research and design projects emerged, ran its course and failed. More importantly, cultural spaces reflected upon and discovered were not only those of the other but also those of ourselves, emerging as a necessary consequence of mutual reflection and recognition. This is why in this blog entry we develop a brief reflection on this design-culture connection in the context of the agenda for HCI in the developing world.

Culture continues to be a contested construct for humanists and social science scholars. Likewise, its value for design-driven academics and professionals regularly comes into question. However, the concept of culture focuses us on the semiotics that allow us to reflect on our condition of symbolic beings shaped by beliefs and emotions. This is turn enables us to see the need for technologies to be more human, and to be able to do something about it.

The focus on making technologies for humans while taking into account diverse cultural and contextual positions should then be part of the default agenda HCI for Development (HCI4D) as a research domain. HCI4D researchers and practitioners have documented how decisions in technology design influence technology usage, adoption and the resulting impacts on a multiplicity of use scenarios and users with social consequences. Recognizing that technology is neither culturally-neutral, static or deterministic reinstates ‘context’ as a harbinger for not only new design choices but for a more immersive and usable HCI product.

HCI4D as a domain and a community of researchers is engaged in the play of technology in quotidian and unusual domains such as diasporic space; conflict zones; low-literacy; reproductive health; and communities on the urban edge. A focus on such topics leads to a discussion on technology for development and a focus on marginalized populations in both developing countries and industrialized nations. In short, HCI4D operates at the intersection of HCI and socioeconomic development with an evolving sensitivity to technology design and use in diverse geographic regions. The field has steadily required increasing receptivity to involve and fuse varied academic and research domain/backgrounds from socio-cultural anthropology to the engineering sciences with an array of disciplines like behavioural and development economics, the cognitive sciences and not in the least a spectrum of design disciplines. Being inclusive, HCI4D presses into service engagements with seemingly disparate sciences and initiates a dialogue in the production of an inclusive design community- one that draws from collective and assorted technology experiences and shapes evidence based research to impact and strengthen multiple interactive technologies scenarios for hitherto invisible yet contemporaneous populations.

Dell and Kumar [2] summarize the HCID research area drawing upon four seminal references that set the context, precursors and current engagements for the domain. Chetty & Grinter [3] who coined the term ‘HCI4D’ argued that entrenched HCI techniques and pedagogy must stay tuned to the shifting technology landscapes of use if they are to function effectively as a domain of designing impactful computing products for an array of contexts, especially the Global South. Burrell & Toyama [4] offer a set of definitional pointers to carve out methodological trajectories constituting good research methods and analysis for a multidisciplinary and inclusive field such as ICTD and HCI4D. The field and learnings from field immersions for a context driven HCI was proposed by Anokwa et al. [5] who reflect on ‘stories from the field’, highlighting cultural, linguistic, and social challenges in the research endeavor with technology users from cultural contexts far removed from those of the researcher. These above authors were instrumental in grounding methodological practices of HCI4D firmly in-context.

Over the course of time, as Dell and Kumar [2] point out, what the ‘D’ in HCI4D referred to remains a topic of intense debate among the many interdisciplinary scholars of the HCID ilk. There is a general agreement about what is described as a focus on development in low-resource settings and/or marginalized communities: low-resource and marginalized are pretty broad terms to suggest recipients of development initiatives. HCI4D research on its part has maintained a focus on design for better access and usability qualified by low-resource settings. Issues of constraints, infrastructural more than cultural, were a running theme as much as concerns for social justice, and a variety of eco-political agendas. Dell and Kumar [2] bring to the fore that “… varied perspectives show HCI4D is an amorphous amalgam of interests that brings together a community of people from varying perspectives…”. It seems the HCI4D has a set of thorny methodological issues and a challenge to grant the domain a definitive identity. The field trips we pioneered demonstrate these issues but with a positive twist, giving the HCI4D field the excitement of an emergent research ground and we becoming a part of it! We invite you to read the Special Topic in ACM IX where the experiences of the different INTERACT 2017 Field Trips are reported [6].

References
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