Everyday Futures: 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 perspectives on how these implications might be researched, understood, and challenged.

Future everyday life is certain to be different from that of today, but how is it shaped in the present? What role do technologies and interaction designers have in creating 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 that 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 disciplines that can help develop everyday futures, a topic that currently slips between the disciplinary cracks. History, sociology, and anthropology, though dealing with the lived everyday, tend not to engage with the future; disciplines such as policy, planning, fashion, and interaction design focus on the future through various objects and scales, but rarely from the perspective of daily life. The workshop established an active and engaged network with a growing membership from a wide variety of backgrounds. It also produced a collection of nine essays (wp.lancs.ac.uk/everydayfutures/essay-collection/), which lay the foundation for an original research agenda.

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 the fields of history, design, sociology, environmental studies, management, and policy, to tailor their contributions for HCI researchers and interaction designers. As such, the articles provide gateways to other knowledge, approaches, and perspectives.

Indeed, the future is already central within HCI research; however, it is primarily approached from a technological perspective. We therefore begin this introduction by highlighting three perspectives on the future explored in the following articles: researching past futures, identifying traces of the future in the present, and exploring assumptions about everyday lives embedded in future visions. These perspectives are valuable for the new light they shed on technologies in everyday life, suggesting roles that HCI researchers and interaction designers might play in shaping everyday futures.

A historical focus, such as that explored by Rebecca Wright and Colin Pooley, highlights that new technologies do not enter a vacuum but rather 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 of why interventions (including technologies) have unexpected outcomes.

Viewing the future as performed in the present—the focus of Tim Chatterton and Georgia Newmarch’s article—examines the diversity of ways of living that coexist at any moment in time between different cultures and social groups. The authors argue that some members of society, including technology designers and researchers, have more power than others to decide the types of futures that get promoted and prioritized. They reflect on how HCI might reproduce, but also challenge, such undesirable patterns. One way of achieving this might be to use new methods to make future imaginaries and visions. As Wright and Pooley note, imaginaries do not simply materialize as envisioned but are nevertheless powerful devices for change. Which leads us to the third perspective.

Daniel Welch, Margit Keller, and Giuliana Mandich point out that all too often future visions—such as the circular economy—gloss over the changed everyday lives essential to their realization. In their article, the authors show how social theories can help to unpack the links between day-to-day life and technology in large-scale future visions. In a complementary article, Maureen Meadows and Matthijs Kouw offer a method for developing multiple visions of a better everyday future, emphasizing plurality and potentially conflicting ideas of “the good life,” rather than seeking 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 these articles are far from the final word, we believe they 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 lives, and in reflecting on how, through research and design, new technologies might contribute to futures that are more equitable and sustainable.

Those interested can join the network by subscribing to the email list (wp.lancs.ac.uk/everydayfutures) and joining conversations on Twitter with #Everydayfutures. We are currently organizing a second workshop on Making Everyday Futures to be held July 2017 at the Department of Industrial Design of the University of Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Participants will experience the making and deployment of artifacts as a way of exploring and questioning future everyday life. More details will become available on the website.

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