

## CHAPTER 10

# Co-designing Collaborative Care Work through Ethnography

Mariacristina Sciannamblo

Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Roberto Cibir

Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences  
& Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Maurizio Teli

Aalborg University, Denmark

### Abstract

This chapter focuses on instances of ethnographically informed design of collaborative systems as they emerge from two European projects aimed at developing sociotechnical infrastructures based on more just collaborative practices. We outline and discuss a number of issues related to the importance of language, the relationship between digital and physical public engagement, the caring role of community gatekeepers, and the reconfiguration of sociotechnical infrastructures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our contribution aims to uncover how ethnographically informed design can support caring-based practices of social collaboration in different contexts.

---

#### How to cite this book chapter:

Sciannamblo, M., Cibir, R. and Teli, M. 2022. Co-designing Collaborative Care Work through Ethnography. In: Travlou, P. and Ciolfi, L. (eds.) *Ethnographies of Collaborative Economies across Europe: Understanding Sharing and Caring*. Pp. 193–209. London: Ubiquity Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bct.k>. License: CC BY-NC-ND

## Introduction

The term ‘sharing economy’ has been used in recent years to label a variety of initiatives, business models, and forms of work and governance that have sparked increasing attention. Critical views are questioning some of the discourses that have characterized the promotion of commercial platforms – such as the rhetoric of socially driven initiatives – in order to unveil the mechanisms through which they reproduce forms of exploitation (Huws, 2015). In this respect, an increasing number of researchers and practitioners have called into question the rhetoric of ‘sharing economy’ in order to unpack the mechanisms by which such platforms exploit social collaboration (Avram et al., 2017). Such an approach has been inflected into several shapes and fields of social life: as digital platforms designed to foster autonomous social cooperation (e.g. Bassetti et al., 2019), as sustainable societal relations beyond the immediate design of objects or services (e.g. Light and Akama, 2014) or as technologies supporting workers in their daily conflicts with employers (e.g. Dombrowski et al., 2016; Irani & Silberman, 2013).

A common thread running through these examples is the adoption of a caring-based sharing approach (Belk, 2017) that relies on ‘relational assets,’ rather than financial rewards, which, in turn, offer an ecology of situated mutually supportive systems. Light & Miskelly (2019) have recently explored this issue through the concept of ‘meshing,’ that is the layering of local sharing initiatives, developing and maintaining local collective agency through their aggregation. The interesting aspect conveyed by the idea of ‘meshing’ is a commitment to designing beyond the sharing economy, in order to promote a different economic mechanism from trade as it focuses on generating caring interpersonal ties and a sense of community (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Communities have been located at the ‘core of collaborative consumption’ (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012: 305) and, in general, communities are increasingly relevant characters in participatory design endeavours (DiSalvo et al., 2012). Cibirin and colleagues (2019) underlined the complexity of this social construct and proposed the use of the concept of ‘grassroots community’ to overcome the distinction between ‘communities of place’ and ‘communities of interest/practice’. In their perspective, grassroots communities are defined through their relation to other social actors – such as existing institutions or corporate actors – and they integrate various configurations of physical relations, shared interests and common practices.

Against this backdrop, this chapter focuses on instances of ethnographically informed design of collaborative systems as they emerge from two European projects that aim to develop sociotechnical infrastructures based on more livable collaborative practices. The first project, Commonfare, aimed at the co-design of a digital platform to respond to societal challenges relating to precariousness, low income, poverty, and unemployment. The second, Grassroots Radio, focused on the development and testing of a platform supporting the creation of

community radios for media pluralism and community deliberation. We compare these two case studies to unpack the ways whereby the co-design of collaborative systems through ethnography can support grassroots communities in (1) elaborating and spreading forms of social collaboration starting from local needs and desires, and (2) constructing spaces for informed reflection and public deliberation within small and isolated areas. In doing so, we ask: what kind of issues emerge from the formation of collaborative subjects through ethnographically informed design interventions? How can ethnographically informed and caring-based design of platforms co-produce collaborative subjects?

By putting these two case studies in conversation with each other, in this chapter we will outline key issues that emerged from such ethnographically informed design interventions related to: (1) the importance of language, (2) the relationship between digital and physical public engagement, (3) the caring role of community gatekeepers, and (4) the reconfiguration of socio-technical infrastructures during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this way, our contribution aims to uncover how ethnographically informed design can support caring-based practices of social collaboration in different contexts.

The chapter is organised as follows: section 2 provides a discussion of the concept of ‘community’ and the emergence of the notion of ‘grassroots’ community; section 3 gives an overview of the relationship between ethnography and participatory design (PD); section 4 offers a description of the two case studies alongside the illustration of ethnographic data; and section 5 delivers a discussion of the issues emerged related to language, the relationship between digital and physical commitment, the role of community gatekeepers and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Defining communities

The concept of ‘community’, real or imagined (Anderson, 2006), and its interaction with technology (Tufekci, 2014) is increasingly central in the debate about the design of collaborative systems (DiSalvo et al., 2012). The literature outlines two main kinds of this social construct. From one side, the *geographical community* or *community of place* (Cabitza et al., 2015; Fernback, 2007) describes a group of people defined by the sharing of physical boundaries. On the other side, the bonds connecting people in a *community of interests* concern the pursuit of a shared process or goal. These definitions of community are not exclusive; indeed, in many collaborative systems they may overlap, as in the case of a local section of an online marketplace, or the ‘missed connections’ category in Craigslist. A particular specification of community of interest is the concept of *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991): in this context, people not necessarily belonging to the same organization share similar activities in a framework that allows their evolution from peripheral participation to full membership.

Cibin and colleagues (2019) show how in the design of community-based technology for social innovation it is necessary to re-discuss the above mentioned 'space vs interest dichotomy': the groups of people engaged in these processes cannot be described merely as pure geographical communities or communities of practice, but are the result of the continuous interaction between these two aspects of their common life. To stress the analytical relevance of this interconnection, the concept of 'grassroots community', outlined by Kuznetsov and colleagues (2011), has been advanced as an 'often spontaneous, non-hierarchical and volunteer-driven' group of people engaged in shaping the context in which social activism takes place, often in contrast with 'the power structures implemented by traditional top-down organizations' (Kuznetsov et al., 2011: 2). For this reason, grassroots communities 'face unique challenges, risks and constraints, which shape designs and appropriations of interactive systems' (Kuznetsov et al., 2011: 2).

The adaptability of the concept of 'grassroots community' and its connection with the formation of collaborative subjects will become more evident in the next sections through the comparison of two European projects, one aimed to support communities beginning with their shared interests, and the other one involving communities starting with their geographical place.

### **(Re)positioning Ethnography within Participatory Design**

As mentioned, the participatory design projects illustrated here have been navigated through ethnographic methods and sensibilities in order to map issues, outline diverse concerns and support the design-in-use processes. As Blomberg & Karasti (2013) point out, the relationship between ethnography and PD has been a topic of debate since anthropologically trained social scientists entered the field of design of information systems at the end of the 1980s (e.g., Suchman, 1987). All the different positions concerning the relationship between ethnography and PD point to the sensibilities, commitments and requirements of the two fields, which share practical limits and philosophical synergies. As Blomberg and colleagues (1993) suggest, the guiding principles of ethnography include studying phenomena in their everyday settings, developing a holistic view, providing a descriptive understanding, and assuming a members' perspective; on the other hand, PD's commitments start from mutual respect for the knowledge of different members (typically users and designers), the need to create opportunities for mutual learning, a joint negotiation of project goals, and the development of tools and processes to facilitate participation.

While early influential research programmes exploring the connections between ethnography and PD proposed a set of strategies to integrate the two agendas (i.e. by outlining their reflexive relation, by treating ethnography as a component of PD's methodology as well as to inform design requirements), more recent approaches suggest seeing ethnography as more than a method, and to embed ethnographic accounts in the design process itself. One of the

latter approaches has been defined as ‘co-realization’ (Blomberg & Karasti 2013), which assumes that the full implications of a new sociotechnical system cannot be grasped by studying the context in the moment of the observation, but will only be revealed in and through the system’s subsequent use. Such an assumption generates a reconfiguration of ethnography within design, which responds to a long-term and direct engagement between designers and users, as well as to the establishment of the locus of design activities in the site of use. Accordingly, the aim of co-realization is to erase the boundaries between design and use, and to engage researchers/designers in the site of use, for them to become members of the local setting as well as to get familiar with local members’ knowledge and mundane competencies. This is even more relevant in multi-sited, longitudinal research projects such as Commonfare and Grassroots Radio, the two projects here analysed, which entailed both temporal and spatial scaling, thus an understanding and a practice of ethnography and design as ongoing achievements of participants over time and space.

The methods whereby such a practice of ethnography took shape in the two projects were design workshops organised with local members of the communities involved, associated with qualitative research techniques such as focus groups, interviews, participant observations and informal meetings and conversations. Moreover, these research activities have been actively shaped by pilot partners and intermediary organisations as part of the project consortium. In this chapter, we refer to such an arrangement of ethnographic activities in a design project as *ethnographically informed design*, a set of practices and activities organised in order to respond not only to the need of collecting useful inputs and requirements for design, but also (and mainly) to explore with local populations the meanings associated to the technologies at stake (a digital platform and a radio), as well as participants’ experience and understanding of the social issues implicated in the projects (i.e. precariousness, poverty, media pluralism, community deliberation). In this respect, as Blomberg & Karasti (2013) argue, ethnography brings an important reflexive stance into design processes, ‘for researchers and designers ... to be able to reflect upon not only activities in the design process, but also upon the multiple intentions and interpretations that build the analytic lens of the research or design project’ (Mörtberg et al., 2010: 107).

### Commonfare and Grassroots Radio

The case studies treated in this chapter pertain to two European projects – named Commonfare and Grassroots Radio – based on the collaborative design of ICT technologies for emancipatory aims.

The Commonfare project (2016–2019) was a European participatory design project seeking to respond to societal challenges within the European Union relating to precariousness, low income, poverty, and unemployment (Bassetti et al., 2018; Sciannamblo, Lyle & Teli, 2018). The project has been piloted in three countries – Croatia, Italy, The Netherlands – with people in precarious

employment, freelancers, non-Western migrants, and unemployed youth. The goal of the project is to support communities beginning with their shared values (Bassetti et al., 2019) and interests on the improvement of accessibility of welfare state provisions as well as on grassroots welfare and care practices (Sciannamblo et al., 2021). The designed platform, called *commonfare.net*, includes storytelling, digital currency (Teli et al., 2018) and trust representation tools (Rough et al., 2019), and it is now managed by an association including some researchers belonging to the initial consortium.

Grassroots Radio (2017–2020) was a European civic innovation project. It was based on the use and development of RootIO (Csikszentmihályi and Mukundane, 2015, 2016), a free/open hardware and software platform that supports the creation of a low-budget and low-power FM radio station (Dunbar-Hester, 2014), without the need for a studio. The aim of the project was the creation of local community radio stations to support citizen collective action (Cibin et al., 2020), community deliberation, media pluralism and the free flow of information in rural geographic communities across Europe, starting from the pilot countries of Ireland, Romania and Portugal (Robinson et al., 2021).

In what follows we address a number of issues emerging from research activities consisting of focus groups, semi-structured interviews, public meetings, informal conversations and participant observation, whose transcripts and elaborations have been collected in documents both internal and public. These issues pertain to the crucial role of language, physical interactions and commonality and the caring role of community gatekeepers, along with the reconfiguration of project activities due to the pandemic. These themes are relevant to the research questions investigated here in that they play a significant role in the articulation of the process of *meshing*, thus in the creation of caring interpersonal ties and a sense of community (Light & Miskelly, 2019; Belk, 2017) beyond the ‘space vs interest’ binarism (Cibin et al., 2019; Kuznetsov et al., 2011).

### *Handling sensitive issues: the importance of language*

The Commonfare project aims at involving different populations – such as those in precarious employment, freelancers, non-Western migrants, unemployed youth – located in European countries – Croatia, Italy, The Netherlands – that present several differences, but also unexpected similarities, in terms of political and cultural history and economic and labour policies (Fumagalli et al., 2017). Institutional agencies usually define these individuals ‘the poor’ or people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2019). Such labelling reflects their subalternity and is often associated with a ‘lack of’ a fundamental property (such as human or financial capital), or a ‘dependency on’ something else (such as welfare provisions) (Bassetti et al., 2019; Sciannamblo & Teli, 2017). The use of such language informed the initial project research activities, including the distribution of a survey, interviews and focus

groups with research participants, as well as self-reflexive exercises within consortium partners.

A key moment of these initial research activities was the self-evaluation focus group conducted with pilot partners in order to discuss their experience with the empirical research and, more generally, about the project. During this activity, many partners, as well as Croatian participants in a parallel focus group, expressed their dissatisfaction with the language used until then to describe the project, a vocabulary deeply marked by the rhetoric typical of institutional funding agencies like the EC. In particular, the preliminary results of the empirical work conducted in the pilot sites suggested that the participants were refusing the labels of 'poor' or 'socially excluded' employed by official statistics (Sciannamblo & Teli, 2017). Indeed, such a language turned out to be experienced as a form of stigma by participants. In early focus groups most people defined themselves *neither poor nor rich*, despite their economic difficulties (Bassetti et al., 2017). What emerged, indeed, is that the target populations refuse to feel themselves excluded, even if it is financially impossible for them to address unexpected expenses of a few hundred euros. Moreover, rather than passively accepting what was perceived as a paternalistic definition, several research participants responded by recognizing values such as social relations and wealth of time and knowledge, outside the capitalist logic of labour-wage.

These findings led the whole consortium to engage in significant discussions regarding the role of language in building sociotechnical projects, and to the consequent redefinition of the project communication, starting from its initial name: PIE News (see Figure 10.1). The consortium used the 'PIE' acronym pointing to the three social issues confronted (Poverty, lack of Income, and unEmployment), but participants rejected the word 'poverty' as a stigmatising

## COMMONFARE AND PIE NEWS: TWO NAMES FOR ONE RESEARCH AND CO-DESIGN STORY

by pienews | Feb 21, 2017 | News

In mid January we, the Commonfare consortium, met in Zagreb to discuss what we did so far and to organize the next phases of participatory design activities. There, we worked with Croatian participants on the design of the platform and we engaged in collective discussions about the research activities that pilot partners are carrying out in Croatia, Italy, and The Netherlands. A pressing issue arising in several contexts concerned the language we adopt to describe the project, its goals, and its ethical and political aspirations.

**Figure 10.1:** News on the change of the name of the project on the project website.



label. As a result, the consortium decided to change the name of the project to 'Commonfare', which refers to the 'welfare of the Common' (Fumagalli & Lucarelli, 2015) as a concept inspiring the whole project since the very beginning (Sciannamblo et al., 2018).

The decision to change the name to Commonfare was aimed at emphasising the positive aspects of the project: chiefly, doing things together. This orientation has also informed the name of the platform – commonfare.net – as well as the claim it displays: 'We have so much in Common'.

### *The relationship between online and offline relations*

The issue of language articulated in the previous paragraph can be considered an example of *meshing* (Light and Miskelly, 2019), namely an effort to build mutual commitment within communities located in different spaces by developing and maintaining local collective agency. Another issue in this regard concerns the need to generate participation towards the commonfare.net platform, one of the main objectives of the consortium since the beginning. To reach this goal, the consortium focused on the organisation of a significant number of events not only in the pilot countries, but also in neighbouring countries. This strategy has served to pursue both dissemination and design goals since the beginning of the project, as specified in the grant agreement: '24 PIE News Networking Events will be organised, to present the project's results (even preliminary ones) to invited stakeholders in order to keep on adapting PIE News focus and stay fixed on the most important challenges for the specific stakeholders' community, based on their feedback'. More specifically, these types of events pursue three main goals: (a) to promote the long-term sustainability of commonfare.net by strengthening the relationship with supporting organisations; (b) to generate content for and attract a diverse and Europe-wide group of participants to commonfare.net, and (c) to promote the concept of Commonfare and create spaces for networking among Commonfare good practices, thus informing and inspiring future actions that promote the idea of Commonfare.

The arrangement of 24 'networking events' was managed by pilot partners through a subcontracting formula, to directly engage like-minded organisations in the activities of the project and promote the formation of a variety of publics around the platform. Moreover, the organisation of these events has been linked to the articulation of the co-design activities in order to make the project itself a 'matter of concern'.

The organisation of networking events in different geographical areas has proved to be a successful strategy able to aggregate and meet different needs. This has been exemplified in the final report dedicated to the account of the events.

As we progressed through our research and design phase through a participatory approach, it became clear that certain communities, those most affected by the 'PIE conditions' of poverty, lack of income and



unemployment, were often least informed and least mobilised to act. For example, in Croatia, a country with one of the highest rates of youth precarity, PIE focus groups uncovered that the majority of youth were not even familiar with the concept of ‘precarity’, and few had heard of a ‘universal basic income’. As a result, our target audiences grew ever larger over the project, as the unmet need for informing, organising and mobilising collective action to preserve the commons is an effort for all citizens. (Pleic et al., 2019)

Indeed, in pursuing this activity pilot partners recognized that their respective countries and regions, and their own unique identities as organisations, required different strategies. The Basic Income Network in Italy decided to foster an early and continuous dialogue with institutional actors. The Center for Peace Studies in Croatia pursued collaboration with NGOs, bottom-up citizen initiatives and movements committed to addressing systemic problems of poverty, inequality and insecurity through bottom-up actions. Museu da Crise in The Netherlands decided to focus more heavily on the individuals directly affected by precariousness via artistic provocation. Dyne organised events focused on Commoncoin and commonfare.net to raise awareness of alternative ways of economic and social organisation. Through the interactive game ‘Le Grand Jeu’, Dyne involved communities in thinking about how democracy, money and self-organisation are intertwined. In all those cases, the goal was to start conversations and to break the mould of social habits and norms.

### *Grassroots care work through ethnography*

One of the Grassroots Radio project’s primary goals was the creation of community radio stations that could represent the voice of all the communities’ members, and also of those groups of people usually marginalised. The involvement of a sufficient number of volunteers to take over the activities related to the management of the radio stations and creating content was one of the main challenges of the project. Initially, this activity turned out to be quite difficult for the project partners when dealing with the inhabitants of a small rural village in Romania. The first encounters with members of this community seemed to indicate a lack of interest in the project due to, among other things, a loss of confidence in voluntary work after the forced experiences during the communist regime. The involvement of Anna, a nurse and community assistant who offers health and social support by meeting people in the village, going house to house, represented the turning point in this situation. After participating in an interview for the station, she expressed interest in the project and quickly started to produce contents, as this account from one of the partners working in the field describes:

So I went there, and I showed how we work on WhatsApp with the volunteers in [the other radio station], and we chose a recording software,

and we chose this from Google Play. She [Anna] put it on her phone, I left, and within one hour she was already sending some announcements, and then everything blew up, everything went from there. She kept on sending interviews. It is like she was born to do radio work. (project partner)

Soon, Anna became one of the radio station's points of reference for the community, doing activities that have many similarities with those practised by ethnographers. The possibility of meeting different people every day allowed her to collect memories, old songs, greetings, cooking recipes and announcements to be broadcast by the station. In addition, Anna asked the interviewees, often older people, to share old photos they kept in their drawers.

I receive messages asking me to find out if a certain person in an old photo on display is not their grandmother or father because they have no picture with them, others ask me to send them a certain picture in the message because there is a relative in it, and they have no picture with that person, many thanks for seeing dear people who are no more here today or send me photos with the request to display them in the memory of the relative who was originally from the village. (Anna)

Together with images of the community's places, these photographs have become part of the content published on the Facebook page of the radio station, also created by Anna. These contents soon became the stimulus to unite the past with the present of the community and the people living in the village with the numerous emigrants. They have found on the Facebook page a meeting point with their roots. It is interesting to note that while the village has about 600 inhabitants, the Facebook page has almost 3000 followers.

At the same time, Anna took advantage of the radio station to face issues concerning her work, as when the Covid-19 pandemic created restrictions on visiting people's homes:

For me, as a community nurse, radio was the means by which I could continue health education actions for the community, broadcasting Health Pills [the name of her radio programme] in the context of the pandemic when I am not allowed to carry out such actions with people gathering indoors. (Anna)

Anna's ongoing networking within the community has also enabled her to engage new volunteers for the station among residents and diaspora members.

*Care in a time of pandemic: the role of community radio*

Living in a geographically remote island can be very problematic in times of emergency, when people need medical support and most daily activities are disrupted. This was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic, which arrived at the beginning of 2020, when the Grassroots Radio was approaching its last year of project activities. The outbreak of SARS-COV-2 inevitably affected the activities of the radio stations and their relationships with community members. In Ireland, public health guidelines ruled that only permanent residents could stay on an island, and restrictions were in place for travelling to the island. This resulted in a number of regular radio presenters and collaborators from the mainland not being able to travel to the islands to provide technical and content-making support. In Romania, the restrictions imposed by the pandemic forced community organisations to reduce their travel to the project sites.

Against this backdrop, the community radio stations showed a remarkable, and sometimes unexpected, capacity to provide organisational, informational and psychological support. For example, the community of the Irish Island was quite careful about adopting measures and behaviours to protect local inhabitants, especially the most vulnerable. Besides reinforcing distancing measures, the Irish island community used the radio to lift the spirit of residents and helped to supplement daily activities. For example, the radio has been used to broadcast the Sunday Mass as the local priest, who is over 70, was forced to cocoon for safety reasons. He agreed to record the mass from home via his phone and the radio was able to broadcast this online and on FM. This allowed those unable to attend the church service due to distance, illness or old age to participate in this community activity. The hospital in the Irish island ensures patients can listen to mass each Sunday on the local community stations. One respondent to a recent listener feedback survey stated, 'Mass during Covid-19 was like a godsend' and another stated that they listened to the radio to get mass but ended up listening to the whole Sunday programme.

Moreover, the radio has been used to support educational activities. Schools in Ireland were shut down on 12 March 2020. The Irish Island's school principal approached the local community radio for support to broadcast to the student body and to help maintain momentum for students who could no longer attend school, and were being taught via internet packages. School assemblies took place at 8.55 every day during this period and the intention was to reinforce the school motto 'Ní Neart go Cur le Chéile' (Strength in Unity), to help keep everyone together, support all the students and help parents through these challenging times. The principal reported that having the assembly online helped motivate students, providing structure before daily online instruction during the pandemic.

In Romania, Radio Civic, the community radio built through the project, organised several initiatives related to Covid-19. Among these was an

information campaign to keep the two local communities involved in the project informed with reliable and official sources. The local radio has also devoted efforts to provide the communities with reliable medical advice shared by doctors and nurses in the ‘Health Pills’ (*masuri de preventie*) programmes. Moreover, as the level of negative news was rising, Radio Civic attempted to also communicate positive information as much as possible. It therefore created a news programme called ‘Vesti Bune’ (Good News), where an actor volunteered to read good news. The local radio also kept bringing the voices of the locals in the programmes, so that they could tell their stories of coping with the isolation and pandemic restrictions.

Another relevant aspect that emerged from the deployment of the radio during the lockdown restrictions was the need to cope with isolation and social distancing from people living away, as one of the Irish listeners told in an online survey:

During the lockdown, I looked forward to tuning in every Sunday. It gave me a great sense of comfort hearing my own people, their accents and easy chatter and talking about the Beara community and its diaspora. I felt included in such strange times. I really appreciate all their efforts.

The deployment and use of the radio during the first weeks of the pandemic in geographically remote sites proved that getting reliable information and maintaining and reinforcing collective and educational activities – such as school and the mass – are important elements to consider to maintain and repair caring interpersonal ties and a sense of community. This was all the more true when the geographical isolation was exacerbated by physical and social distancing as a consequence of the pandemic. In this situation, the presence of a community radio can alleviate the void and isolation, as the expatriate listener pointed out.

## Discussion

We started this chapter by raising two related research questions – concerning issues emerging from the formation of collaborative subjects through ethnographically informed design interventions, and how caring-based design of platforms can co-produce collaborative subjects. We have discussed examples related to two projects, Commonfare and Grassroots Radio, that – although addressing communities beginning with their interests (Commonfare) or their location (Grassroots Radio) – both show how communities can be thought as integrating interests and place, being therefore definable as grassroots communities.

Although the projects shared a similar perspective and organisation of work, they differed substantially, not only in terms of goals, locations, target populations and technologies, but also in terms of the relation with the grassroots communities involved. If in Commonfare the goal had been to co-design and implement technologies supporting already existing grassroots communities engaging in caring practices in their mutual recognition and in building networks, in Grassroots Radio the aim was to favour the formation of bonds and ties in geographical communities through the design process. In this way, we can see how the different communities involved approached the issue of *language*: in the case of Commonfare, already existing collaborative subjects rejected the label imposed on them by the project and by the official statistical label, forcing the designers to reshape the language; in Grassroots Radio the use of spoken language in the radio programme triggered a process of bonding, entailing also the visual language of old pictures and the telling of stories about the ancestors of the actual residents. Equally, the dimension of *physical interaction* is different: in Commonfare physical events and interactions were crucial for the adoption and use of digital technologies; in Grassroots Radio the limitation of physical interactions related to the diffusion of SARS-COV-2 showed how the radio stations could be an infrastructure to maintain a sense of community and collective ownership of a shared heritage (Bidwell, 2016).

Finally, the issue of *commonality* can be stressed: how does one foster a sense of collective ownership and communal resource? In Commonfare, the refusal of the initial project name suggested a further step to undertake in order to achieve a sense of commonality; in Grassroots Radio, commonality has been built by active intermediaries, from Anna to the local priest, who have turned the design project into daily life experiences that are familiar to the members of the community and that have contributed to strengthening the bonds between people, even for those no longer living within geographical boundaries. These relational assets are the basis for the emergence and stabilisation of a grassroots community.

These emerging issues – *language*, *physical interaction*, and *commonality* – let us reflect on how design can contribute to the emergence of collaborative subjects, that is to trigger and recognize potential controversies (such as the potential stigmatisation in Commonfare), and to support the emergence of dense interactions, face to face or remotely, allowing people to tackle these potential controversies. Moreover, the networking events in Commonfare and the use of radios during the Covid-related lockdowns in Grassroots Radio, together with the relations cultivated in both cases, suggest that platform design not only should aim at designing the digital platform, but also should focus on *meshing* the physical infrastructure for the creation of caring interpersonal ties and a sense of community (Light & Miskelly, 2019; Belk, 2017).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have focused on instances of ethnographically informed design of collaborative systems as they emerge from two European projects that aim to develop sociotechnical infrastructures based on more than just collaborative practices. In particular, as we referred to ethnographically informed design as a set of practices and activities organised in order to respond to the need not only to collect useful inputs and requirements for design, but also (and mainly) to explore with local populations the meanings associated with the technologies at stake, as well as participants' experience and understanding of the social issues implicated in the different design projects, we could see the importance of language, the relationship between digital and physical public engagement, the caring role of community gatekeepers, and the reconfiguration of sociotechnical infrastructures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

More specifically, when engaging with language, physical interactions and commonality, designers could benefit from considering ethnographically informed design interventions supporting practices and ethics of care (Belk, 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), not so much as means to collect inputs to be translated into programming languages, but rather as ways of creating the conditions of *meshing* (that is, layering local interactions and agency) based on discussions about taken-for-granted labels, controversies and local interests. That opens up a set of new research directions, which extend beyond the projects we have presented. For example, Commonfare and Grassroots Radio have highlighted the importance of having flexibility and being reflexive, one of the key elements of ethnography, which pose questions when one is planning a design project. Is flexibility accommodated? Is reflexivity an explicit part of the approach?

Another example comes from the concept of 'meshing', as it questions design projects in relation to their capacity to fit the existing relational assets and to position design activities and outputs in relation to the different layers. How can projects be planned and conducted in a way that relates meaningfully to the existing, and evolving, layers of local interactions and agency? In summary, we think our projects have reiterated the importance of organising design projects around ethnography and meshing and that, with the focus on language, physical interaction and commonality, they have highlighted where to begin in structuring an approach to organise meshing-oriented design projects.

## References

- Albinsson, P.A. and Yasanthi Perera, B.** 2012. 'Alternative Marketplaces in the 21st Century: Building Community through Sharing Events.' *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 11(4): 303–15.

- Anderson, B.** 2006 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. London ; New York: Verso Books.
- Atkinson, P.** 2007 *Ethnography : Principles in Practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203944769>.
- Avram, G., Hee-jeong Choi, J., De Paoli, S., Light, A., Lyle, P. and Teli, M.** 2017 'Collaborative Economies: From Sharing to Caring.' In *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Communities and Technologies*, 305–7. C&T '17. New York, NY, USA: ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3083671.3083712>.
- Avram, G., Hee-jeong Choi, J., De Paoli, S., Light, A., Lyle, P. and Teli, M.** 2019. 'Repositioning CoDesign in the Age of Platform Capitalism: From Sharing to Caring.' *CoDesign* 15(3): 185–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2019.1638063>.
- Bassetti, C., Sciannamblo, M., Lyle, P., Teli, M., De Paoli, S. and De Angeli, A.** 2019 'Co-Designing for Common Values: Creating Hybrid Spaces to Nurture Autonomous Cooperation.' *CoDesign* 15(3): 256–71.
- Bassetti, C., Botto, F. and Teli, M.** 2018 'The Commonfare Project. Designing to Support Grassroots Welfare Initiatives.' *DIGITCULT*, 1(3). <https://digitcult.lim.di.unimi.it/index.php/dc/article/view/69>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4399/97888255159095>
- Belk, R.** 2017 'Sharing without Caring.' *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 10(2): 249–61. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsw045>.
- Bidwell, N.J.** 2016. 'Moving the centre to design social media in rural Africa.' *AI & Soc* 31, 51–77. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-014-0564-5>
- Blomberg, J. and Karasti, H.** 2013 'Ethnography: Positioning ethnography within participatory design.' In *Routledge international handbook of participatory design*, edited by Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson, 106–136. New York: Routledge.
- Blomberg, J., Giacomi, J., Mosher, A. and Swenton-Wall, P.** 1993 'Ethnographic field methods and their relation to design.' In *Participatory Design: Perspectives on Systems Design*, edited by Douglas Schuler and Aki Namioka, 123–55. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cabitza, F., Simone, C. and Cornetta, D.** 2015 'Sensitizing Concepts for the next Community-Oriented Technologies: Shifting Focus from Social Networking to Convivial Artifacts.' *The Journal of Community Informatics* 11. <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/1155>.
- Cibin, R., Robinson, S., Scott, K.M., Sousa, D., Žišť, P., Maye, L., Sciannamblo, M., Ashby, S., Csíkszentmihályi, C., Pantidi, N. and Teli, M.** 2020 'Co-designing convivial tools to support participation in community radio.' *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 18(1): 43–61.
- Cibin, R., Teli, M. and Robinson, S.** 2019 'Institutioning and Community Radio. A Comparative Perspective.' In *Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Communities & Technologies-Transforming Communities*, 143–54. ACM.



- Conference, R.T.D., Csíkszentmihályi, C. and Mukundane, J. 2019 'RTD2015 19 RootIO – Platform Design for Civic Media.' <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1328001.v1>.
- Csíkszentmihályi, C. and Mukundane, J. 2016 'RootIO: ICT+ Telephony for Grassroots Radio.' In *2016 IST-Africa Week Conference*, 1–13. IEEE.
- Di Salvo, C., Clement, A. and Pipek, V. 2012 'Communities: Participatory Design for, with and by Communities.' In *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, 202–30. Routledge.
- Dombrowski, L., Harmon, E. and Fox, S. 2016 'Social Justice-Oriented Interaction Design: Outlining Key Design Strategies and Commitments.' In *Proceedings of the 2016 ACM Conference on Designing Interactive Systems*, 656–71. DIS '16. New York, NY, USA: ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2901790.2901861>.
- Dunbar-Hester, C. 2014 *Low power to the people: Pirates, protest, and politics in FM radio activism*. MIT Press.
- Eurostat. 'People at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion – Statistics Explained.' Accessed July 31, 2019. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People\\_at\\_risk\\_of\\_poverty\\_or\\_social\\_exclusion](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion)
- Fernback, J. 2007 'Beyond the Diluted Community Concept: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective on Online Social Relations.' *New Media & Society* 9(1): 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444807072417>.
- Fumagalli, A. and Lucarelli, S. 2015 'Finance, Austerity and Commonfare.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 32(7–8): 51–65.
- Fumagalli, A., Serino, R., Gobetti, S., Morini, C., Allegri, G., Paes Leão, D., Willemsen, M. et al. 2017 'PIE News – Research Report.' *Deliverable D2.1 Produced for the PIE News Project*. [http://pieproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PIE\\_D2.1.pdf](http://pieproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PIE_D2.1.pdf).
- Huws, U. 2015 'ICapitalism and the Cybertariat: Contradictions of the Digital Economy.' *Monthly Review* 66(8): 42.
- Irani, L.C. and Silberman, M. 2013 'Turkopticon: Interrupting Worker Invisibility in Amazon Mechanical Turk.' In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 611–20. ACM.
- Ismail, A., Karusala, N. and Kumar, N. 2018 'Bridging Disconnected Knowledges for Community Health.' *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 2 (CSCW): 75:1–75:27. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274344>.
- Kuznetsov, S., Odom, W., Moulder, V., DiSalvo, C., Hirsch, T., Wakkary, R. and Paulos, E. 2011 'HCI, Politics and the City: Engaging with Urban Grassroots Movements for Reflection and Action.' In *CHI'11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2409–12. ACM.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991 *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge university press.
- Light, A. and Akama, Y. 2014 'Structuring Future Social Relations: The Politics of Care in Participatory Practice.' In *Proceedings of the 13th Participatory Design Conference: Research Papers-Volume 1*, 151–60. ACM.

- Light, A. and Miskelly, C.** 2019 'Platform of Platforms: Meshing Networks, Scales and Values for a Local Sustainable Sharing Economy.' <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-019-09352-1>.
- Mörtberg, C., Bratteteig, T., Wagner, I., Stuedahl, D. and Morrison, A.** 2010 'Methods that matter in digital design research.' In *Exploring Digital Design: MultiDisciplinary Design Practices*, edited by Ina Wagner, Tone Bratteteig and Dagny Stuedahl, 105–46. London: Springer-Verlag.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M.** 2017 *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Robinson, S., Bidwell, N.J., Cibin, R., Linehan, C., Maye, L., McCarthy, J., Pantidi, N. and Teli, M.** 2021 (in press). 'Islandness and HCI'. *Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, Rural Islandness as a lens for (Rural) HCI*, 28(3) (in press 2021): 1–28.
- Rough, D., De Paoli, S. and Botto, F.** 2019 'Supporting social innovation through visualisations of community interactions'. *Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Communities & Technologies-Transforming Communities*.
- Sciannamblo, M., Cohn, M.L., Lyle, P. and Teli, M.** 2021 'Caring and Commoning as Cooperative Work: A Case Study in Europe'. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction CSCW1* 5: 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3449200>
- Sciannamblo, M., Lyle, P. and Teli, M.** 2018 'Fostering Commonfare. Entanglements Between Participatory Design and Feminism.' *Proceedings of DRS Design Research Society Conference*, 2. Limerick, Ireland: University of Limerick. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2018.557>.
- Sciannamblo, M. and Teli, M.** 2017 'Undoing the Ontology of the Poor: A Participatory Design Project.' 2017. [http://www.4sonline.org/blog/post/undoing\\_the\\_ontology\\_of\\_the\\_poor\\_a\\_participatory\\_design\\_project](http://www.4sonline.org/blog/post/undoing_the_ontology_of_the_poor_a_participatory_design_project)
- Suchman, L.** 1987 *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Teli, M., Lyle, P. and Sciannamblo, M.** 2018 'Institutioning the common: the case of commonfare'. *Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> Participatory Design Conference: Full Papers-Volume 1*.
- Tufekci, Z.** 2014 'The Medium and the Movement: Digital Tools, Social Movement Politics, and the End of the Free Rider Problem.' *Policy & Internet* 6(2): 202–8. <https://doi.org/10.1002/1944-2866.POI362>