

# Inviting to co-articulations of issues in designerly public engagement

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## Introduction

This chapter does not try to create an overview of design anthropology or tell a tale of how it has emerged as a discipline. What we will contribute with is to discuss a crucial issue for design anthropology: the practice of inviting to collaborative formations of issues.

Design researchers and anthropologists engage in multiple kinds of invitations as part of research - invitations to user studies, interviews, ethnographic field works, co-design workshops, prototyping, public engagement events and more. The reason for inviting is partly to widen the epistemological community and to democratise the development of new designs or technological systems. In this chapter we will put focus on invitations that gather actors to collaborative formations of issues related to everyday living with technologies.

Making invitations are however not innocent, since it is a way of framing the expectations for the gathering. How an invitation is crafted will in other words influence what issues or problems are dealt with, who will take part and how. If we are interested in widening the epistemological community and democratisation of design and innovation we also have to allow for issues, and not only solutions, to be co-articulated. Rather than treating problems as something pre-given or static, that is articulated in the invitation, we will in this paper discuss how invitations can pose problems more inventively and allow for *inventive problem making* (Fraser 2010; Michael 2012; Gabrys et al 2013). By this we mean that the parameters of a problem *can* be changed, but are not necessarily so, through various kinds of responses to the invitation.

Our interest in and concern with invitations has been present in our more than decade long collaborative and practice-based research on public engagement. For example, in our first joint project, done in 2003 when Kristina Lindström worked as an interaction designer at Swedish Television and Åsa Ståhl as a journalist at Swedish Radio, we invited people to a game of telephone on answering machines. We invited to play a game, and what intrigued us the most was how participants' responses continuously pushed and altered the rules or parameters of the game.

Since then we have continued to craft invitations for playful and mundane engagements with sociomaterial entanglements related to telecommunications. Our discussion on how co-articulations are made will be based on two of those projects: *Threads - a Mobile Sewing Circle* and *UNRAVEL / REPEAT*. In *Threads* participants are invited to join a sewing circle for a day to

embroider an SMS by hand or with an embroidery machine. In *UNRAVEL / REPEAT* we acted as contemporary ragpickers and asked for what we figured to be a contemporary kind of rag: discarded mobile phones.

Before turning to the empirical accounts we will situate our work within design anthropology.

## Reconfiguring the relationship between design and use

In descriptions of the emergent field of design anthropology (Gunn et al 2013; Gunn and Donovan 2012) one difference between design and anthropology is often described as having to do with temporality. Whereas anthropology is about understanding the present through the past, design is more future and change oriented.

This difference in temporality has at times resulted in a rather linear mode of design anthropology, where anthropological knowledge about the present is used to inform designerly speculations about the future. Gunn and Donovan (2012) propose three versions of design anthropology - dA, Da and DA where the capital letter in the abbreviation indicates where the emphasis is put. They describe DA as "... a shift from informing design to re-framing social, cultural and environmental relations in both design and anthropology (Kjersgaard 2011)" (Gunn and Donovan 2012, p. 8). As we understand this, DA is about mutual transformation rather than one discipline serving the other. This mutual transformation do, as we see it, also invite for other temporal engagements, than the rather linear version mentioned above. This also suggests re-framed relationships between not only designers and users but also design and use, which also is a central issue of design anthropology (cf Gunn and Donovan 2012, Ingold 2012).

To discuss other potential temporal engagements within design anthropology we will turn to participatory design which has both topical and methodological overlaps with design anthropology. Participatory design is a predominantly research-based design practice, where the relationships between designers and users have been re-framed by inviting potential users to take part in the design process. This work is often done by multidisciplinary teams, that include designers, anthropologists, sociologists, engineers and more. But perhaps most importantly users are part of these teams. The reason for inviting users is to broaden the epistemological community to include also lay-people in knowledge production and to democratise innovation and technology development.

Within recent literature in participatory design, several scholars have argued for design strategies such as *design-after-design*. Compared to more traditional participatory design projects that primarily invite participants to engage during project-time, design-after-design as a design strategy suggests that participation is not only restricted to making design decisions before use but also during use (Binder et al 2011, Ehn et al 2014). This means that some design decisions are deferred from project-time to use-time.

Redström (2006) articulates the challenge of inviting for participation before use as two folded. To begin with, users of a design that does not exist yet do not exist. And secondly, not even potential future users that have knowledge and experiences of a potential context of use, can

fully predict issues that will emerge through and in use. To adhere to these challenges Redström argues that we should rather design for questions to be answered in use rather than designing answers.

To adopt the design strategy of design-after-design is, as we see it, not only a reframing of designer and user, by engaging users during project time, but also a reframing of design and use, by allowing for design decisions to be made in use. Furthermore, these reconfigurations of the temporality of design work creates new conditions for how design and anthropology can meet. As described earlier, one common configuration of design anthropology is that anthropological studies are made to inform designers in their production of objects. If design is also made in use, another objective of design anthropological work could be to inviting participants to inventive problem making in their own everyday life and to foster skilled users.

This then suggests a shift in when we invite and to what. Rather than inviting participants to engage in the shaping of new technologies and design to be used in the future, there is also a need to invite participants to engage with designs and technologies that are already in use and the potential issues that they can become part of. What we suggest is thereby that there is a need to invite not only to participate in design projects but in designerly public engagements.

## Designerly public engagement

In our understanding of designerly public engagements we are building on Michael (2012)<sup>1</sup>. His arguments for designerly public engagement are based on work done within speculative design, or more precisely the project Material Beliefs coming out of an interdisciplinary collaboration at Goldsmiths, University of London (cf. Beaver et al 2009). The aim of speculative design is not simply to inform publics about the latest scientific findings but to generate debate. This is usually done through the design of evocative objects that are exhibited in galleries. To understand speculative design as a mode of public engagement, Michael argues that we need to use another understanding of publics, than the one enacted within social sciences.

He describes social scientific public engagement as a counteract to a democratic deficit by inviting the public to citizen panels and focus groups regarding the latest scientific findings and technological innovations, such as biotechnology. These gatherings are thus ways for the social scientists to create a meeting between experts and laypeople with the aim of channeling public opinions into the existing institutions in order to influence policy making.

This enactment of public engagement is rather linear and goal-oriented. It fits with understandings of publics that are out there, that can be called into an assembly and where voices and messages can be transported upstreams in order to solve problems.

Designerly public engagement, as another ideal type, does not necessarily start off with an urgent controversy to gather around, no brand new innovation or scientific finding that a public is

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter four in Lindström and Ståhl (2014) for our elaborations on designerly public engagement that include examples not only of speculative design, but also participatory design, critical making and media archaeology.

invited to engage with and no hope for voices to be turned into messages that can be transported to decision-making-processes. Designerly public engagement does not even presuppose that there is a public to call into an assembly. The role of the members or constituency of a public in designerly public engagement is to be "... thoughtful within a context of complexity" (Michael 2012, p.541), rather than "citizenly" (whatever form that might take) within a context of policy making" (ibid).

Speculative design usually uses evocative objects in order to explore complexity of a new and emerging technology such as biotechnology, and to allow for issues to emerge. These objects are thus not (yet) mainstream or part of everyday use. Rather than finding or communicating already given problems, the ones gathering around these speculative objects made by designers, are invited to *invent* problems (Michael 2012, p. 542, see also Fraser 2010). The ones gathering are thus challenged to shift the parameters of an issue or a concern.

Designerly public engagement is thus not about scientists informing publics or publics informing policy makers. Rather, it is to collaboratively generate potential issues, between scientists, designers, publics and materials.

In the following sections we will discuss two public engagement projects where we deal with issues that emerge through use and where design and use are seen as continuously mutually becoming. The two projects differ in scope and structure, but are both engaging with everyday entanglements in telecommunications.

## Inviting

To allow for issues to emerge rather than treating them as pre-given puts challenges on how we invite. Keshavarz and Mazé (2013) argue that through framing a design project, for example through the articulation of an invitation, a problem or issue is defined. To some extent this means that initiators of any kind of participatory project, more or less, in advance prevent the possibility for dissensus or inventive problem making. One way of understanding this argument is that an invitation and who it is directed to, frames what the problem is, how to engage with it, and who are to be concerned. We certainly agree with Keshavarz and Mazé, that making invitations is a way of framing - and doing so is not innocent.

Throughout our collaborative practice during the past decade, invitations have always been important as a way of articulating an *area of curiosity*, and a proposal of how to engage with it. Rather than expressing a problem through the invitation, we have found it generative to craft invitations that sparks and is built on curiosity. In broad terms, the area of curiosity that we invite to is *ways of living with technologies*. When we use the term living with technologies we mean the everyday living with computers, mobile phones, but also how this use is in relation to others who, for example, live nearby or work with hydropower, server farms, landfills with e-waste, recycling stations.

In the following sections we will discuss two practice-led research projects where we invite people, to engage with everyday sociomaterial entanglements in mobile telecommunication. We

will show how we and others, through the invitations and responses to these invitations, co-articulate more specific issues within this area of curiosity. The two projects are *Threads - a mobile sewing circle*, where we invite to embroider SMS by hand and with a machine, and *UNRAVEL / REPEAT*, where we, as ragpickers, invited to a relationship where we signed a contract promising to take care of people's discarded mobile phones as responsibly as possible.

In both projects we invite to engage with designs that are or have been in use. The invitations do not express a well defined problem but enact certain expectations of how the participants live with technologies. In *Threads* the invitation assumes that the participants use text messaging. In *UNRAVEL / REPEAT* the invitation assumes that the participants have a surplus of discarded mobile phones tucked away in drawers.

### **Threads - a mobile sewing circle**

*Threads - a Mobile Sewing Circle* was a collaboration with Rural community centres, Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan, Vi unga and Malmö University, where we were based<sup>2</sup>. Between the years of 2009 and 2013 *Threads* traveled mostly to rural community centres, but also to other, rural and urban, cultural centres in Sweden. All of these organisations work with *folkbildning* (which is a Swedish term for informal learning, which could be translated to public engagement). In this collaboration public engagement was done through the invitation to *Threads*, which in short was: "Welcome to embroider an SMS". This could be done by hand or with a machine in a sewing circle that lasted for up to six hours.

Usually a group of about 10 to 20 people gathered. The day started with the hosts introducing the participants to *Threads* through the materials in the room. Since not everyone knew each other, time was spent on a round of introductions.

The materials that travelled with *Threads* was among other things threads, needles, new and secondhand fabrics as well as other durable goods. The tables were set with table cloths to embroider on. Around the table hung clotheslines with embroidered text messages, from previous sewing circles, pegged onto them. On the clotheslines hung also an exhibition with reproductions and original artwork which dealt with texts and textiles, such as textile graffiti on public transport seats, an embroidered letter-conversation between two friends and proverbs stitched onto linen towels. On a separate table an embroidery machine connected to a mobile phone made it possible for participants to have their messages embroidered by a machine. It was all embroidered with the same font and size, just like an SMS has a rather set format.

Some participants knew already at the beginning what to embroider by hand or with the machine. Others looked closely into their mobile phone inboxes and outboxes in order to figure out what to embroider in what way. Yet others made several decisions during the day based on

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of conducting this research we were PhD-students at the School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Sweden. At the time of writing this chapter we are postdocs at Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University, Sweden, as well as senior lecturers at Malmö University, where we pursue a new research project on public engagement. For more extensive accounts on *Threads* see Lindström and Ståhl (2014).

both what they brought with them, what the hosts had introduced, and what came up, for example in discussions, in the gathering.

**Figure 1:** Participants gathered in *Threads*.

## Invitations

As mentioned, the invitation to *Threads* was to embroider an SMS. Importantly, this invitation was not only done through words, although a lot of attention was paid to the words, but also carved out in several materialities. Furthermore it was not only enacted by the two of us but also by the collaborating partners and participants in the sewing circles.

These multiple invitations were for example enacted through posters, the project's website, phone calls and embroidered garments on a clothesline where the gathering would take place. During the gathering the inviting continued through the introduction, the inspirational examples on the clotheslines, how the table was set and what could be seen on the table cloth in the form of traces from previous sewing circles. The connection to previous sewing circles were also done through anecdotes.

Traces on the table cloth or anecdotes from previous sewing circles might not be the most obvious form of invitations. Marks and traces of how others have understood and been with the other participants and materials in the sewing circle have, however, proven to be a generative way of inviting to the project. When we once asked how the participants tell others about *Threads*, one replied that she would do it by showing what she had embroidered. To invite through showing examples was also done on the website where participants could upload pictures of their embroideries.

In the following section we will give accounts of how these invitations, in *Threads*, engender more specific co-articulations of issues of living with technologies.

**Figure 2:** Embroidered text messages hung on a clothesline.

## Co-articulations of issues

Many participants responded with curiosity to the invitation in *Threads*. They embroidered text messages in more or less creative ways. For example, two young participants responded to the invitation to embroider an SMS by making a BFF-pillow made out of two linen towels. BFF is short for Best Friends Forever. Since they only made one pillow they decided to take turns and have it every second week in their respective homes.

Our invitation, the selection of text messages, which were sent between the two of them, but also between other friends' of theirs, in combination with the making of a pillow, became a co-articulation of how they as best friends live with technologies. Their way of responding to the invitations, materials and what was at hand is a kind of co-articulation of how they live with technologies, including text messaging. Rather than altering or challenging our invitation to *Threads*, their response fits very well with some of the assumptions embedded in the invitation.

### **Figure 3: BFF-pillow**

Another kind of co-articulation was made in another rural community centre, where one of the participants did not have any messages to embroider. Since she did not have any messages, she had prepared herself before coming to *Threads* by sending an SMS to her family members that said: “Need a text before Saturday”. While we were gathered in the sewing circle she received one message from her daughter that said: “Why don’t we call each other instead. Text messaging is so impersonal”. During the sewing circle, she embroidered this message with the machine, and another message, that she got from her husband, by hand.

In this case the invitation, her initiative to send a text message to her family members, their replies, her embroidering and more became a co-articulation of the co-existence of a technological push, curiosity as well as reluctance towards new technologies. Our invitation became a push for her to start sending text messages, and the daughter’s response was an expression of hesitation.

Whereas both examples involve complex relations between several engaged actors, both present and involved on geographical and temporal distance, the latter response did not fit as well with expectations expressed through the invitation as did the girls’ response with the embroidered BFF-pillow. Instead of seeing the absence of experience in text messaging as a failure, this misfit, in the second example, between assumptions and experience amounted to a more inventive co-articulation of ways of living with technologies.

**Figure 4:** Embroidery machine embroidering “Why don’t we call each other instead. Text messaging is so impersonal”

### **UNRAVEL / REPEAT**

*UNRAVEL / REPEAT* was a commissioned artwork for the art museum *Konstmuseet i Norr* in the very northern parts of Sweden. The commission included that we were encouraged to engage with all of this area, which is scarcely populated and stretched out over extensive area neighbouring Finland as well as Norway. Although it is an art museum, they did at that time not have a building. The reason for this was partly that the city where it is located, Kiruna, is about to be moved because of expanded mining underneath the town and risk of implosion into the new mining site.

Since the two of us are not located in this area of Sweden we did not want to define a clear problem in advance, or solutions for that matter. Instead we tried to craft an invitation, that expressed an area of curiosity for us and others to engage with. The area of curiosity was still *ways of living with technologies*, or more specifically telecommunication technologies.

To do this we took on the role of being contemporary ragpickers (*lumpsamlare in Swedish*). Traditionally ragpickers in Sweden would travel and collect discarded wool. In this project, we

envisioned that a contemporary kind of rag would be discarded mobile phones, possibly tucked away in drawers. Being curious of these processes, we invited people to donate their phones to us - so that we could work with the materialities to unravel and repeat. We did this partly hoping that we would be invited, to people's homes, workplaces and more.

### **Figure 5: Discarded mobile phones.**

In a second phase of the project we created an SMS-novel that was based on recompositions of the collected material, stories and phones as a way of unravelling and repeating with diffraction what we had collected. In this process the aim was not to preserve the stories nor to create something that would last forever, but to continue the practice of unravelling and repeating as ragpickers. We called the SMS-novel P.S. Sorry if I woke you, which refers to both how we gave the materials an afterlife as well as how the subscribers to the novel might be woken up by the SMS-novel buzzing in their mobile phones. In this paper we will focus on the ragpicking phase (see Ståhl et al 2014 for an account of the second phase).

### **Invitations**

Similar to how we worked in *Threads* we used multiple invitations to engage and reach people living in this area. We used flyers, put ads in newspapers, made envelopes so that people could send mobile phones to us later, set a table at a cultural house where we invited people who passed by. Thanks to some of our contacts at *Konstmuseet i Norr*, we were also able to visit some people in their homes.

### **Figure 6: Flyer**

### **Co-articulations of issues**

During the week we spent travelling in Norrbotten we visited several people in their homes, as well as a youth club, a home for the elderly, a recycling centre and much more. Some spent several hours talking to us. Some of the phones we were given had broken screens, some had no batteries and some seemed to be working just fine. Throughout this ragpicking our invitation was part of more or less surprising and thought-provoking co-articulations of issues and problems. However, these co-articulations did most of the time not challenge the assumptions that people have an excess of discarded mobile phones that they are willing to let us take care of.

We will now give an example where these assumptions were challenged and where the co-articulations were part of more inventive problem making.

One early morning we went to a village north of the limit of cultivation with three households where no mail is delivered until the oldest person in the village turns 80. Although the village is so far north and so sparsely populated, two out of the three households do not have a driver's license. Thereby the landline phone had been crucial means for communication. A woman, that invited us to her home, told us that due to the expansion of mobile telephony, it had been



decided that the landline would be cut off. To her and the others living in the village mobile telephony was however a less reliable means of communication since the reception was weak. The weak and unreliable mobile phone reception both meant that batteries would not last very long and that it was not always possible to make or receive phone calls.

To secure a more stable phone connection, she had spent a considerable amount of time, effort and money to set up a system that allows her to get an internet connection through which she could have telephony (see figure 7). Compared to the landline, this configuration demands continuous updates and upgrades, which to her meant money, time and worry.

**Figure 7:** Technologies assembled to enable telecommunication through Internet.

Even though the mobile phone reception was unreliable she did have a mobile phone, that she considered giving to us. The phone was a so called feature phone, the same kind that several others had given to us to take care of. After our more than two hour long conversation she decided to keep the phone. She described that to her a new smartphone would not be an upgrade, since what she valued the most was battery time. She thus altered the parameters of our invitation and reconfigured the implicit assumption in our invitation that excess of technological devices is the normal state of affairs. Her decision to not give her phone to us, and thereby rejecting our invitation, challenged capitalism and technological progress as the desirable. Her family does not have a life of cash, but lives off the land and animals, so, continuously buying new telephones and other devices to connect it to are big expenses compared to the landline phone that had lasted for many years.

## Inventive problem making

*Threads* and *UNRAVEL / REPEAT* are quite different in terms of how they are structured, their objectives, scale and more. What they both share is, however, that they start with some kind of invitation, which has opened up for co-articulations of issues as well as more or less inventive problem making.

While both of these projects might seem sweet and all cuddly, we argue that framing an invitation to an art project or a research project that invites for engagement and participation is not innocent (Haraway 1997). It is a way of framing, if not a problem, at least an area of interest or curiosity, which inevitably will include and exclude. Potentially it will only attract those who are already interested in the matter at hand, and thereby shape a space for consensus.

If we think of these projects as public engagement projects, it is reasonable to ask: What kind of engagement? What is our role as researchers, in relation to the public? And, how are problems or issues articulated? As we have shown through our accounts, the engagement is not simply about us (as researchers) transferring knowledge or new scientific findings to the public, and not about them transferring information to us (as researchers) to be used to inform a future design decision. Instead, the invitations engender issues to be co-articulated. As we have shown, issues of how to live with technologies are articulated between our invitation, materials that we

have brought to the table, what the participants bring, and how all of these materialities are reordered.

Co-articulations means that, rather than representing issues of living with technologies, that were already there to be represented, issues in *Threads* and *UNRAVEL / REPEAT* emerge in the encounter between our invitation and how the participants respond to these multiple invitations. In other words, issues are made or enacted together, as compositions of the participants' experiences, memories, materials, including mobile phones and text messages, other participants' stories, the materials and technologies that we and the other participants have brought, and more.

Important to note is, however, that these co-articulations can be more or less inventive. Most of the time participants respond according to the expectations embedded in the invitation, for example, to embroider an SMS that remind them of someone important to them. When *the problem* is posed more inventively is usually when the assumptions enacted through the invitations do not fit well with how participants live with technologies.

For example, one woman did not have any messages to embroider. Since she did not have any messages she decided to contact her family. In doing so she also altered the invitation - to embroider something that you have had saved for a long time in your mobile phone inbox. The problem was thereby also altered - it was not that she had a large number of messages, but that she did not use text messaging. This possible problem, of not having text messages, was then questioned, in a way, through one of the text messages that suggested that text messaging as such is not a preferred means of communication.

In *UNRAVEL / REPEAT*, there were also those, whose' lives did not fit well with assumptions enacted through the invitation. By asking people to donate their obsolete phones, we assumed that there is an excess of discarded phones. This was however not always the case. For example, the woman who lived in the village where the landline was to be cut off decided to not give us her phone. To her a new smartphone would not be an upgrade.

As mentioned, the invitations are not only expressed through words. The same could be said about the articulation of issues. Participants in these articulations are human participants, as well as non-humans such as copper land lines (or lack thereof), subscriptions, phones, messages, and more.

Since the invitations usually involve a kind of engagement with everyday entanglements these articulations do at times also become interventions into the participants' everyday lives. Or, re-enactments of sociomaterial entanglements. When such a displacement of relations, tiny diffraction in the relations, is enacted, then it is a form of inventive worldmaking. Not only was the problem posed differently, but the living with technologies was also slightly reconfigured. For example when we invite people to embroider a text message or donate their discarded phones we do potentially also participate in a technological push. The invitation to embroider an SMS encouraged the woman in *Threads*, who had not used text messaging before, to start text

messaging. We cannot know for sure, but the invitation to take care of people's discarded phones in *UNRAVEL / REPEAT* might have encouraged some to get rid of their phone to get a new one. This invitation might in other words have participated in the becoming of obsolescence.

In line with Gabrys et al (2013, p. 7) we thereby suggest that it can be generative to bring together “mutually incompatible framings” that do not easily align, as this allows us to pose problems more inventively. If our aim is to craft invitations that open up for inventive problem making, the main concern is not to create a perfect fit between the invitation and ways of living with technologies. Instead we need to allow for actors, situations, experiences, actions, to speak up and contradict what is taken for granted.

## Conclusions

Design anthropology as a combination of two disciplines can be enacted in different ways. Here, we adhere to one that assumes mutual transformations of them, which tries to not reiterate a version where design is the one uniquely focused on future and change and anthropology focused on understanding the present through the past.

To reconfigure this relationship we have partly turned to recent literature within participatory design that argue for designing for design-in-use, or design-after-design. As we see it this approach does not only refigure the relationship between designers and users, as traditional participatory design have done, but also reconfigure the relationship between design and use. That design takes place not only in projects, but also in use, is also acknowledged by some design anthropologists (cf. Gunn and Donovan 2012).

This understanding of the relation between design and use can have several implications for how design anthropology is enacted. In this paper we have focused on how this implies a shift in when we invite and to what. Instead of inviting participants to engage in the making of design to be used in the future, we have argued for inviting participants to engage in issues that emerge when things are already in use. Participants are thus not invited to solve problems, but to co-articulate issues of the ongoing living with technologies. Through our own examples and accounts of empirical work of designerly public engagement we have shown that inventive problem making primarily takes place when there is a friction between invitation and response to the invitation.

The reason for expanding the epistemological community is not only to inform us as researchers, but to invite participants to inventive problem making - or worldmaking - in their own everyday life and to foster skilled users. The potential inventiveness of a co-articulation is however not the same for all participants. Is it, for example, inventive for the design anthropological researcher? Or, for the participants in the co-articulations? Every designerly public engagement begs the questions: for whom is it inventive and how?

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