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UTOPIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Utopian Social Media

Abstract

Inspired by the work on utopia of Ruth Levitas, and drawing on narrative inquiry and arts-based research methods, this paper presents the result of a series of social media utopia-making workshops where regular users of social media were invited to discuss the things that bother them and propose alternatives to the visions of control and manipulation that fill our reality and the research horizon. The paper is a combination of academic/methodological discourse and creative writing fueled by the workshop results.

Keywords

utopia, social media, digital media, narrative inquiry, users of technology, co-design

Introduction: bleak house of digital

The novel by David Eggers, *The Circle*, is a dystopian vision of a near-future where an almighty company seeks to eliminate privacy by integrating all functions of society (social networks, internet searches, purchase activities, education, social security, democracy...) within its own all-encompassing system. In *The Circle*, where PRIVACY IS THEFT, nobody can hide anything. The novel shows how the protagonist, Mae, gets more and more involved with the company, first as a low level customer service

employee and later as a star ambassador for a total openness project, whose life is broadcasted in real life to the whole world (live video feed, disclosure of all screen interactions and disclosure of her bio data). The novel´s satiric strength lies at depicting Mae´s slippery slope as she gives up her privacy. It is not a matter of a definite hard decision (yes or no), or even of not knowing the consequences of each of her actions, but a gradual slippage where some things seem right, some things seem slightly off, and still she continues until there is nothing more to give.

The novel is maybe too obvious, too rough in the way it caricatures our current love affair with self-disclosing technologies. Still, there is a point in bringing these topics into the general conversation, since the totality of our life, also its most intimate aspects, are mediated as never before. We keep our memories in the cloud, share our inner thoughts on social media, trust our phones to keep track of our loved ones and even outsource birthday greetings to our personal (digital) assistants. Even our relationship to our own bodies becomes mediated when we engage in self-tracking activities such as wearing watches that monitor our movement or sleep patterns (Rettberg, 2014), practices that have been said to constitute a quantified self (Lupton, 2016). On the one hand, we freely share much of this intimate information on all manner of social and digital media. On the other, every single step of our online activity is registered and stored so that different entities can harvest the data we produce and attach them to our profiles. This double articulation of voluntary expressions and involuntary tracking constitutes an algorithmic identity (Cheney-Lippold, 2011) that we seem to be powerless to influence. The new tensions and paradoxes are difficult to resolve, since they are two sides of the same coin:

the digital media that enable us and enrich our lives are at the same time unwanted sources of external dominance.

In communication and media studies, the academic attention to the ways in which data about the self are freely given, harvested and used has been growing since the beginning of the century (see for instance Dijck, 2013). Big data coming from user generated content give “insight into a person´s opinions, dispositions and behaviours” (Tufekci, 2014). In marketing and politics, we are witnessing a shift to tailored/individualized messaging. Marketers feature products to us which our friends are interested in, as a form of “implied endorsements” which are ultimately an exploitation of their identity (Fenton, 2012, p. 128) in a neoliberal approach that markets the self through targeted advertising (Gehl, 2014). This intensive information gathering gives way to power assymetries, control and manipulation (Fuchs, 2014, p. 158). The libertarian times of the early Internet are over (Lovink, 2011, p. 1), as social media offer no real participation (Fuchs, 2014, p. 12; Dijck, 2013, p. 58), maybe because anonymity is no longer possible (Lovink, 2011, p. 46).

However, it would actually seem that users have known this for some time, that we are aware of what Susan Barnes has called "the privacy paradox" (2006), of how we need to disclose ourselves in order to use social and digital media, opening up for tracking and control. Shklovski has conceptualized the feeling of unwanted invasion in terms of "creepiness" (2014), which users however forget, or rather ignore, in their daily interactions with technology. Nevertheless, it is something that lies behind every single

interaction we undertake, even though we might adopt a pragmatic approach, as Shklovski et.al. describe: "Smartphone users do not want to uninstall all of their overprivileged applications. They accept that this is payment for getting something for “free”, and they feel at ease with paying for it as long as nothing negative happens" (2014, pp. 2354). Their work acknowledges that cultural attitudes can change but advocates for responsible design, since complex EULAs (End User License Agreements) which nobody reads are clearly not the way forward.

Dystopia would then seem to be the most appropriate cultural genre to react to this, to wake us up, to keep us vigilant. For it is not only our giving up our privacy that is the problem, but also that the quality of our digital interactions could in fact be less worth than we think it to be. *The Circle* hits hard on this too: "I think you think that sitting at your desk, frowning and smiling somehow makes you think you’re actually living some fascinating life. You comment on things, and that substitutes for doing them. " (Eggers, 2013, p. 263). The novel criticizes how social media postings, reviews, and comments are ultimately just gossip, and feed an artificial need for false communication, resonating with some effects research that assume mediated subjects to be passive and helpless (Hoge et.al, 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), or completely disempowered (Anderson, 2005, p. 96; Turkle, 2011).

While I acknowledge the need for awareness on the face of user exploitation, I also think that dystopian accounts can enforce a sense of powerlessness and despair that is hard to counteract. That is why I would like to explore what the users themselves have to say,

and what they see as valuable in relation to their use of digital and social media. What is worth sacrificing their privacy for? What kinds of participation and connections are worthwhile for them and why? I would like to turn the tables and in order to challenge the dystopian picture, open up for a utopian picture, in which users are invited to formulate their own visions for alternative social media use, to investigate the contexts of engagement and maybe together sketch a glimpse of a better future.

A utopian method

In her *Utopia as Method. The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Ruth Levitas (2013) has beautifully described utopia making as a "quest for grace" (p. xiii), in which utopia characterizes the search for a better way of being or living. Her book explains how imagining alternatives to the ways we live now has always been a fuel for the imagination of sociologists and cultural theorists alike. She rejects criticism of utopia as too fantastic or a distraction from actual problems, by arguing that utopia is not just about how possible alternative futures might turn out to be. In fact, it is the very act of wanting something else, utopia as desire, that makes us aware of the lacks and injustices of our current situation. Her multifaceted conception of utopia is worth quoting in length as direct inspiration for this paper:

"Utopia as a method has three modes. The first is an archaeological mode, piecing together the images of the good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies. The second is an ontological mode which addresses the question of what kind of people particular societies develop and encourage. What is

understood as human flourishing, what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed, by specific existing or potential social arrangements (...). The third is an architectural mode --that is, the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future acknowledging the assumptions about and consequences for the people who might inhabit them." (2013, p. 153-154)

These triple articulation into an archaeological, an ontological and an architectural mode show the range and ambition of her project, where the utopian gaze can be used to investigate our current reality, to interrogate its assumptions (which become explicit) and to formulate new possibilities. Reading Ruth Levitas, I was inspired. If we could somehow devise a method that would get regular users to reflect about their current social and digital media habitus, encouraging them to imagine alternatives, we would be able to maybe cover the three utopian modes and look into a future that was less bleak, and at the same time more productive, because it would take our desire as a starting point for change.

The utopian method is of course a way of thinking, but in order to articulate it into a concrete research design, I turned to narrative inquiry, a research methodology that builds upon the idea that people shape and interpret their lives through storytelling. As Connelly and Clandinin define it, narrative inquiry is "the study of experience as story" (2006, p. 375). Researchers using this method typically ask people to tell stories about their lives and experiences in various ways, sometimes aided by other media. For example, a family life researcher might ask people to bring a picture of their parents in order to kickstart a

conversation in an interview situation. Thus, the subjects and the researchers create stories together, that can then also be analyzed through a narrative lens. In this way, I wanted to experiment with a methodology that would invite the participants to tell stories about their use of social media. I wanted to collect their current experience and to motivate them to think of possible utopian stories as well. Of course, these utopian stories would be fictions, tales of hope for a better world. Narrative inquiry also opens for the articulation of research results in the form of narratives themselves, as Patricia Leavy has argued for through her work on fiction as research practice (Leavy, 2013), within the general paradigm of arts-based research (Leavy, 2009; Barone & Eisner, 2011), which I previously have worked with myself in connection to a study of users reaction to tablet reading (Tosca, 2015). These related methodologies are well suited to investigate areas which are not so easy to rationalize, particularly our everyday experience, where a lot of the knowledge of what we do and why is tacit and difficult to access by other means. I would like to borrow the words of Barone & Eisner to argue for the choice of presenting the results of empirical investigations as stories:

"the contribution of arts-based research is not that it leads to claims in propositional form about states of affairs but that it addresses complex and often subtle interactions and that it provides an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable. In a sense, arts-based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world" (p. 3)

Utopias, in Levitas sense and as narratives of an imagined future, also hold a heuristic power, so I reasoned that there was a good overlap with both narrative inquiry and arts-based research methodologies. In devising the shape of my utopian empirical collection, I got some inspiration from co-design methods, which often invite users to participate at different stages of the design process of a new technology (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Sleeswijk, 2009). From them I borrowed the idea of involving participants in a (here fictional) design process where the goal was to improve the design of current social media. My hope was that this framing would allow for some roleplaying, where users pretending to be designers could devise alternative, utopian, stories of social media use. Participants were made aware of the fictitious nature of the experiment and told that the desired outcome was not so much to come up with any technological features that were feasible, but to think of utopian designs as a way to to find out what was important for them in social media use. Apart from recording some conversations and taking general observation notes, I also collected the design prototypes/artefacts that were sketched in order to use them as a starting point for a narrative re-imagining that would serve as a synthesis of each workshop.

Fig 1. Working at the workshop!

I ended up running three workshops with very different participants, where the results varied greatly in nature of the productions, length and attitudes. The first workshop involved 4 senior citizens in rural Spain, the second involved 20 Danish university

students living in the capital (in this case, activities were done in groups of 5 people), and the third, 6 Danish province town teenagers. The workshops were run in the same way despite the big difference in numbers, where each phase articulated one of the three utopian modes as proposed by Levitas:

1. Welcome and introduction round.
2. Archaeological phase (about looking into our life as is, dissecting the affordances of our social media reality). Every participant writes statements about their personal current social media use, trying at least to come up with two valuable things that social media contribute to in their life and two things that annoy them and should be improved/changed. The statements were written in the form of mini-stories with cause-effects and emotions: “I hate my wall because it is full of irrelevant pictures of babies and cats”.
3. All statements are collected, printed and cut up.
4. Ontological phase (about evaluating social norms and affordances together). In groups, participants discuss the statements as they classify them according to affinity. They find common themes and ways to transcend the personal and interrogate the system.
5. Architectural phase (about imagining alternative scenarios). Participants (alone or in groups) are encouraged to come up with utopian design ideas in order to solve some of the problems or potentiate some of the valuable features. The ideas can be stories, drawings, poems, or any other expressive format.

The three groups had very different focus points, as their life situations were very disparate. This is concurrent with other research that points to the great use differences in social media according to age, gender, social status or nationality (Klastrup, 2016, pp. 42-59) There was a lot of homogeneity within each group, partly also because collecting all the statements after the archaeological phase forced participants to tune in to the collective and not only their own personal worries. However, there was great disparity as to media use across the groups. They didn´t use the same social media or, if they used one in common (Facebook was present in all the groups), it was done in a very different way. Their patterns and frequency of use also varied greatly, even though they all worked with the smartphone as the central device in this inquiry. For instance, the youngest group talked extensively about their Snapchat use, while the senior citizens didn´t even know what that was, and were more worried about never being able to find anything again in their phones once the feed had moved on. Consequently, the groups had to be facilitated differently, for example in relation to timing to move from one phase to the next. The way the tasks were organized (archaeological phase/individual statements, ontological phase/group work and architectural phase/design work) suited the big student group specially well, as it was rather similar to their regular class activities. The younger group was hesitant to turn their speculations into actual utopian designs (but they did it in the end). The older group didn´t really think they could design, so I had to facilitate this phase with an improvised "wishing well" metaphor, to get them to produce a series of wishes about alternative imagined social media futures.

Utopian artifacts

I analyzed the results of the workshops (field notes, recordings, statements, affinity diagrams and “designs”) from the three groups through the lense of narrative analysis in order to develop them into a series of five artifacts (utopian narratives of non-existing features and inventions). The artifacts have therefore not been "designed" directly by the participants as they are presented here, but each of them has features that appeared in the conversations or designs, and represent some of the main topics that guided the discussions in each of the workshops. In narrative analysis, “the researcher extracts an emerging theme from the fullness of lived experiences presented in the data themselves and configures stories making a range of disconnected research elements coherent, so that the story can appeal to the reader´s understanding and imagination” (Kim, 2006: 5). This, as Kim notes elsewhere, is very similar to a regular qualitative analysis process of finding codes, categories, patterns and themes (2016: 188), with the additional dimension of trying to “interpret meanings through an analysis of plotlines, thematic structures, and social and cultural referents” (190) in an interpretive process always geared towards finding the narrative meaning that informants experience and tell about. The many stories had to be condensed through a process of narrative smoothing, understood as selection and interpretation of the data in order to present a coherent story that is also engaging (Spence, 1986, Polkinghorne, 1995). Spence warns researchers of the dangers of manipulating data in order to create a better story (1986, p. 213), insisting on the importance of giving a faithful account of the contents and circumstances that are important for the research subjects. He proposes an ethics of interpretation based on an awareness to nuances, a respect for ambiguity and the guarantee of confidentiality even at the expense of some data richness (1986). This was very important for me in the process

of synthetizing and looking for the best way to convey the collective stories and meanings that emerged in the workshop situations. For example, in the student group, several of the users mentioned a "crap button" or a way to mark and get rid of useless, boasting posts by others in social media. This has become the "bullshit nomination" in the "Envynator" story I have written. I have also, in all of the stories/artifacts, used the words of the participants whenever it was possible, also to attain more emotional impact. For instance the sentence "I only look at cute cat videos when I am sad for real", as it appears in "the Mood Ring", was literally written by a participant. An advantage of this method is that no participants can be identified, so their personal and candid accounts cannot be traced back to their identities. This is in line with Markham´s idea about fabricated data, which helps “protecting privacy in arenas of shifting public/private contexts” (Markham, 2012: 341).

The two first artifacts ("Aquarithm" and "Envynator") belong to the workshop with university students; the two next ("the Mood Ring" and "The Ultimate Social Media App") are a result of the workshop with teenagers, and finally, the "My phone My rules" manifesto stems from the conversations with the elderly citizens. Even though the participants were told to think in utopian terms, some of the features are very critical, even directly dystopian. It is apparently extremely hard to shake this way of thinking off. I present the artifacts free of commentary in order to allow the reader to form her own opinion, and reflect upon the content, the process and the method in the final section of the paper.

The Aquarithm

The service technician fiddled with the control panel at the back of the big tank and activated some switch with a loud click. He had worked rather slowly, Anne thought, it had made her a bit impatient. So she had gone for a walk while he had filled the water, placed the plants and all the rest. Finally, it was done. A yellowish light illuminated the top of the box, revealing the small ecosystem of corals, rocks, aquatic plants and algae. Now she became aware of a soothing sound of water and air bubbles rising from the aquarium, or, as she corrected herself, the aquarithm.

--Are they real? --she asked the technician, who was putting his tools back in a greasy case.

--What? The plants? --she nodded, he continued--. As real as it gets, madam. The sensors will monitor real living conditions and report back to the system.

--But what if one of them dies and I don´t want it to die? --she surveyed the plants she had chosen in the catalogue. She didn´t know their actual names, but she could remember that the big lettuce-like leaves stood for left-wing news outlets, the one with the reddish small branches was her badminton club, and the bluish coral thing her erotic literature group.

--That is unlikely to happen if you follow the instructions. But of course, if you realize that something strange is happening to your feed, you can always have a plant replaced for free. It is in the guarantee.

She nodded. He finished his packing and stood up with a tired expression. He had mentioned earlier that it was his fourth installation today.

--Do you have any questions about populating the environment?

--No, thanks. I think I got it.

They both stood still for a second, and then he seemed to gather his strength.

--I will be off then. Good luck.

Anne waited until the man had closed the door behind him. She felt a bit silly, but she wanted to be alone when she released the fish into the water. Maybe he was used to people being particular about their fish. The aquarithm was after all an expression of her most intimate likes and dislikes. She didn´t know if she could call them desires, but in any case, she didn´t want others to know. Only that of course they wouldn´t know, because it was only her who held the key to what each of the species meant. The four guppies were her parents and her two siblings, the angelfish was Morten, and each of the ghost shrimp one of her closest friends. All the other people she knew were dumped into groups, the red coral was all the highschool people, and the grey rock her work colleagues... Only she had access to the ecosystem codes, which she could change at any time, either through her computer or by taking creatures in and out of the water. She would favour this last method, she thought. She had even signed up for the feature where the different brands of fish food meant different things: FISKO would help highlighting feel-good stories like births of babies or party pictures, while FISHU would keep the feed free of all noise but life-changing events. And she had five other brands that did different things. This way she would slowly tweak her feed until it was satisfactory.

A feed was of course a living thing, that is why the idea of pairing it with an aquarium was so brilliant. The Aquarithm project had been funded by the EU, and the company who ran it was a non-profit, only collecting money to cover the costs of the materials and

the salary of its programmers. Aquarithm´s filtering algorithm would from today on override all of her social media algorithms, generating a feed that was controlled by her, and tended to in the form of an aquarium. She was a late adopter, because she hadn´t believed it possible that the big social media giants would give up their hard earned control, but they had been forced to by the united efforts of the national governments. If they wanted to operate in their territories and make business with data provided by their citizens, they would have to legally submit to Aquarithm. There had been a long legal battle of course; they didn´t want to give up on feed clutter, targeted advertisement, and unfair showcasing of influencers... In the end, the big companies had given in, no doubt expecting that some people would opt in for the adverts or be too lazy to actually care to tend their own algorithm themselves. But there were more and more people like Anne, happy to finally be able to self-steer her social media, where the eccentric reflections of her fun aunt Dagmar (an orange starfish in her Aquarithm) would top her feed even if she only had 10 followers. Because her wackiness always made her happy.

The Envynator

This week in GeekTech zine we are reviewing the Envynator, the new rage in the add-ons to our social media apps. The Envynator allows you to mark the enviable posts that turn up in your feed, the things you would also like to have: a delicious meal, a nice new car, or an exotic holiday to Bali. You can only mark one post every day, and it has to be things that could reasonably be gotten for you also. That is, you cannot mark a picture of someone getting married if you don´t even have a boyfriend/girlfriend, but you can if you do have a partner and are broke and that is why you haven´t yet held the big party. Once a

week, the Envynator team will randomly pick one of the submissions of its many users and grant that person their wish. In the following pages, we are running a beautifully photographed feature with several of the lucky winners from the last couple of months. We haven´t been able to confirm where the funds for this company come from, since the product is free to download and install. There are some who believe that "You Know Who" company stands behind it, as the data they get from the Envynator are even more valuable to them than regular likes, specially because of the Bullshit points, which is, if you want, the ace under their sleeve.

Because there is one catch in order to use the Envynator: you have to fuel it by submitting Bullshit nominations. Everyday, you can mark at least one of the posts in your various feeds as Bullshit, and that releases the right to use the Envynator once. Bullshit can be anything, you don´t need to explain it or justify it. It could be the picture of a perfect family scene by one of your friends whom you know is about to get divorced, or that guy from college boasting about his new fantastic middle manager position in a software company. Actually, as you can see, there might be a weird kind of overlap between the Bullshit nominations and the Envynator. In fact, if you have marked a person´s posts as Bullshit too many times (the company doesn´t release how many or how often) you won´t be able to mark any of their posts as Envynator posts, so you might end up trapped in a circle of unfulfilled envy and hate, with nothing real to envy. A way out of the condundrum could be to try to befriend people who are inherently sincere and don´t post to show off , but out of the goodness of their hearts, or teach yourself to envy

less bullshitty things, like a sunset at the beach or a walk with a dog. However, that can also become Bullshit in the hands of the right person.

The mood ring

Well it is made of silver, I guess, or something that looks like silver, and has tiny diamond-like beads. Do you think that if someone finds it lying around on the ground, they will return it? It has no value for anybody else I should think. It has been made for me and has grown with me and it reacts only to me. For everybody else it is just a ring.

Fig 2. sketch design for the mood ring

How does it work? It is the greatest thing, it saves me from thinking, from actively choosing all the time! When I wake up, I lie a bit on my bed thinking of the day ahead. Maybe it is only Tuesday and I have a double German lesson or Geography, and I see through the window that it is raining. That makes me a bit depressed so I rub the ring and let it know. I have programmed twenty moods which I can activate by touching one or several of the beads in different ways, I dont need to say anything aloud. So when I am a bit depressed, or maybe it is just morning-lazy, the ring communicates with my phone and some of my favourite, mood-lifting songs will play on Spotify. If I have said that I am a bit melancholic, you know, that cozy feeling of a bit sad but not really, then maybe a song like Havana by Camila Cabello is the right thing. I will let the music play while I get dressed, and then at breakfast, I will check my social media. Only good news today,

that is, positive messages, all the likes I have gotten, events I have looked forward to, the morning greetings of my classmates in Snapchat... Critical comments and trollish stuff are filtered out, also annoying family members posts on Facebook or anything that makes me think or is too lively for such a quiet morning. The mood ring adapts everything to me, so I don´t have a hard start that morning. Later, as the day advances, the boring lessons will be completed, the sun might come out and I might get more hopeful. I tell the ring that my batteries are charged and it will open for all the interesting YouTubers I follow about fashion and sustainable living and how to be more enviromentally friendly. While I watch and get some tips and tricks to implement in my life I might get a message that the guy I like has just asked another girl out. I tell the ring, and then it is exclusive time for series, videos and music that will lift my mood. I only look at cute cat videos when I am sad for real.

The Ultimate Social Media App is a person

Fig 3. A wish tablet

"My phone/my rules" manifesto

This manifesto has been made by us, elderly citizens (we cringe at the notion!). The machines produced by our generation just worked, without having to make life difficult for everybody who tried to use them. This generation produces stupid machines that with remarkable lack of independence need their human masters to constantly take decisions that are utterly meaningless. Here are our demands!

1. we have the right to decide for ourselves what we will use our phone for and how its interface will look like

2. we have the right not to know the names, logos or specificities of use of any app; instead, the apps have to adapt themselves to our needs

3. we will not deal with installing and deleting of apps, nor with their updates, all this will happen in the background without us having to know

4. we will not tolerate any kind of spam, annoying pop up or strange advertisement as to how our phone could be so much quicker or virus free

5. we have the right not to buy a new phone for as long as the old one works; and it´d better work for many years because we don´t care about following any fashion fads

6. the phone will work as a phone, with no strange noise in the background, interruptions or need for shouting, the quality of the calls will be like in the old analog phones

Here is a drawing as to how such a phone could look. We would rather decide ourselves what is important! Maria is my daughter, and her little alarm-lamp will light up whenever she wants to get in touch with me. I dont have to think about how she has sent that message. It could be an sms, an email, something in Messenger, in Whatssup or whatever, I dont care, I will just click on it and see her message, and when I answer back,

the phone will decide by itself which of those apps is better to convey that message to her. I have no clue what she uses and she changes all the time, anyway, so our machines can deal with that. I can´t be bothered.

Fig 4. sketch My phone/my rules

I want a button for Maria, but also for my brother Carlos, for my best friend Antonia and my neighbour Julia. My other friends can be in a shared button, and then I want separate buttons for the choir, the hiking club and the library, because I need to be up to date with the things that are happening there and not to miss practise or meetings. When the hiking president sends a map, I want to just be able to print it and not have to fumble with a thousand weird apps I don´t understand before I can get to the actual map. And oh, I also want a calendar where information from the various apps get picked up: for example the day´s weather forecast, whose birthday it is today and what´s on the telly. Together with the telephone function and the camera, which are the ones I use the most, I also want a "ForKeeps" button. That button I can always activate, no matter if I am reading a message, watching a little video or hearing a song on the radio. When I press the "ForKeeps" button, my phone will save whatever it is I want saved and put it in my album so I can find it again. When saving stuff, I will be able to say aloud what it is ("that video with the panda baby" for example), and this will be recorded and I will be able to search it using my voice also.

Closing Reflections

In the spirit of arts-based research, I would like to avoid telling you how to interpret these stories with a monolithic conclusion of my own. You are responsible for your own interpretation, and you are also free to decide if the artifacts themselves provided you with some insight into "the complexity of human experience and social life in ways that may not be possible otherwise" (Leavy, 2013: 52). Perhaps they fulfill the evaluation criteria for arts-based research proposed by Barone & Eisner: "incisiveness, concision, coherence, generativity, social significance, evocation and illumination" (2012: 148). However, there are a few questions that need answering at this point about the process and the method itself. I will do so in the form of closing reflections.

As I wrote above, I have taken pains to ensure that the stories represented the participant´s voices, and that the topics and tone correspond to what transpired in the workshops. The overwhelmingly present topic is that of control. All participants, regardless of age or life circumstances, fantasized with social media that responded to them instead of the opposite, as one of the elderly participants put it, "like my washing machine". The elderly, though enthusiastic about the new connection possibilities, felt that they couldn´t cope with the exigencies of maintaining their apps and administering the various communication channels. They felt that they had to bend themselves over backwards to comply to the irrational demands of the technologies; and their wishes were of telephones that worked for them, and not the other way around. The students wanted to break free of the social pressure of much of their media use and also dreamt of alternative ways of steering their feeds completely themselves, without third party intervention, a

utopian picture with no companies making money out of them, the product. The teenagers just wanted their media to adapt to their moods and wants, refusing to cooperate with the given rhythms established by others.

I was surprised by the fact that the undertone of these aspirations could fit under Krugs design classic book title: *Dont Make Me Think*. That is, for people who are so wary of the lack of control they now have over the social media they use daily, it is paradoxical that they express desire for yet another system in order to override the current system. Even when drowning in technology, more technology seems to be the only answer. Their aspiration, however playfully fantastic, was that alternative systems could be invented that would be completely attuned to their deepest needs and thoughts. This was unexpected and unsettling in ways that I do not yet understand, but it certainly plants a seed that will merit further investigation. Particularly because it seems at odds with the media research aspiration of making users conscious about their own explotation and loss of rights that I described in the introductory section of this paper. That is, the literature advocates for more transparency, while the workshop participants seem to wish for more opaqueness, an opaqueness that can be trusted.

But what is the value of such an impressionistic view of social media use? I haven´t undertaken any representative big study with well-defined populations, and cannot claim that any of the "results" presented here are thus valid for anyone else than the participating subjects. Their subjective experience is also without a doubt shaped by the way the workshop was organized, and even by the timing, as in the spring of 2018, the

Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal filled all media outlets and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) became enforceable. That is, there was enormous media focus on the topics of privacy and of the big Silicon Valley companies misusing our data. Still, I must admit that I was surprised by how narrow the diversity of topics turned out to be, and how much the future was imagined within the confines of the current corporate social media landscape. I was also struck by the absence of other topics, like the possibility of hiding one´s identity online, or challenging power relations or surveillance, which are important topics in discourses advocating for alternative social media (Gehl, 2015, p. 7-8). Arguably, the workshops could have been run in another way to facilitate more truly utopian thinking, and I will use this experience to modify the method for future trials. In particular, I believe that I focused so much on addressing technology as the center of the discussion, that along the way we all forgot that the true objective of utopia is to change society. I could have directed the participants attention towards a utopian society instead of utopian technologies. Moreover, the sketching part of the exercise turned out to be rather daunting for most of the participants, not used to being put in a "designer role". On retrospect, I should have looked more deeply into co-design methods and their well-established ways of involving users, instead of just being superficially inspired to create the roleplay of “designers of utopia”. Most participants were comfortable with expressing a series of wishes, but it was very unsettling for them to be asked to put those wishes into some form of fantasy artifact. The excessive focus on wishes is somehow disempowering, as it assumes that others can come and grant them, so it made participants fall back into a more well-known role, that of the "client is always right", complaining about things that definitely needed changing. More active roles need

to be devised and communicated to the participants. I believe that embracing the empowering role of the designer (an architect of utopia!) can be an advantage of this method over other forms of qualitative empirical collection, which are more focused on, in Levitas words, the archaeological and ontological modes.

However, I must admit that we didn´t quite manage to be really utopian in these three workshops. In fact, the visions sketched here are very individualistic, as the collective dimension advocated by Levitas seems to be missing. Participants kept themselves very close to reality, not willing to attempt wild science fiction leaps in their imaginings even though I tried to encourage this at some stages. Despite this, positive elements emerged in the architectural phase, as it showed people who care about their personal relations and dream of a world where the machines serve their own interests instead of the other way around. The participants are conscious of the shaping power of current social media, see themselves as subordinate to their smartphones in different, interesting, ways, and take distance from them using irony and sarcasm. However, it is a testimony to the power of our current social media habitus that we couldn´t really formulate an alternative. Still, I believe that there is a value in the five artifacts condensed here. I would like to propose, together with Riddett-Moore, K. & Siegesmund that "arts-based research uses objects that move in a place of metaphoric juxtapositioning and somatic, qualitative relationships to disturb and trouble our existing discursive understanding". (2012) These objects that move are not meant to substitute other kinds of study, like quantitative or qualitative approaches to understanding social media use or any other attempts at theorization and ontology making. They show a complicated picture that doesn´t let itself be resolved

under easy categorizations of "good" vs "bad" media use, or ideas that less control is always the best option. They are also a testimony of how difficult it is to prod to people´s ideas and reflections about their own daily media activities and how much of what we do and what we want is not easy to verbalize to satisfy the eager researcher. These objects can show "burning areas" in the consciousness of regular users and hopefully inspire to "make explicit embedded ideas of the good society and bring them to democratic debate" (Levitas, 2013, p. 155). That must be the first step towards transcending the structural constraints of the social and technological contexts we are subjected to.

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