

Emerging Collectives and the Everyday Exercise of Future-Making

Abstract

Sociotechnical imaginaries of the future bring with them how the world ought to be ordered. Primarily dominated by elite white male perspectives from the Global North, they often reinforce dominant power relations without challenging their socio-political effects. By building on feminist theory, this paper aims to address how shaping futures might be done differently, with different people, and in different forms. It introduces *emerging collectives*, the ecologies of participation that self-assemble for future-making as an everyday practice. Empirical exploration consists of two parts. It starts with a review of three design events in which participants were invited to create speculate imaginaries about the future of emerging technologies. Based on the lessons learned in the design events and also by incorporating feminist conceptualization of temporality, the second part introduces and tests a new approach in opening up the process of shaping futures. With a particular focus on economic futures, emerging collectives are put in the position of the knower to reflect on their everyday practices to generate inherently imaginative, social, and dialogical alternatives. By aspiring what might be, they challenge the imagination of people who are incapable of imagining possibilities beyond the confines of dominant economy. In other words, emerging collectives are instances of the Pluriverse, a world in which many worlds fit, to aspire action and guide change.

Keywords: *speculative design, feminist futures, community-based participation*

In speculative futures, the key capacity of design is to give material quality to *images about the future*, creating tangible possibilities to be discussed and reflected upon. For this purpose, designers create immersive experiences, embodied interactions, and affective engagements to engage the audience in a journey to an alternative to the present. The aim of these endeavors is to prepare the society to anticipate certain emerging socio-technical transformations. As feminist technoscience teaches us, the ways in which we represent things can have worldmaking effects. The nature of worldmaking in design is fundamentally political since different social groups have unequal possibilities, different levels of access to resources, and unequal proximities to sources of power to realize their aspirations and visions. Yet, little effort has been paid in questioning underlying assumptions in futures scenarios, ignoring the responsibility that comes with engaging in future-making. Speculative futures often imply a superior designer position with elitist views on a *better world* that society should aspire towards. By preferring particular realities over others, designers are enacting certain values. It raises political concerns such as what does preferable futures mean, for whom, and who decides. As Adam and Groves describe, the task for contemporary experts on the future is “not about knowing that future, but rather aiding individual and social endeavors to choose wisely from a spectrum of options and preferences with their associated potential effects” (Adam & Groves,

2007, p. 34). This includes suggesting ideas for future artifacts and practices, and exploring the consequences of the suggested changes. At the same time, they give people a voice to express their hopes and fears while the future is in the making. Here, “the future is not a blank space for the inscription of technocratic enlightenment, [...] but a space for democratic design” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 299). Thus, the question is how to use collaborative methods in ways in which participants are meaningfully involved in the creation of those options.

This paper offers an overview of three design events in which participants co-create speculative futures for emerging technologies. The goal was to encourage thinking more imaginatively about the future, envisioning, inventing, and pursuing more diverse possibilities. These events include: unpacking driverless technology using a classic scenario building methodology; exploring microgrids as the foundation to build smart communities using design fiction; and envisioning the future of local making and manufacturing using utopia as the method of inquiry. These cases foreground the capacity of design to engage people in future-making. It also provides insights for understanding the process through which participants, in a collaborative approach, envision alternative possibilities for the future.

Based on the lessons learned throughout design events and by incorporating feminist conceptualization of temporality, this paper opens up the process of future-making to engage *other* modes of knowing. Thus, I introduce emerging economic collectives: *local ecologies* exercising a new kind of economic reality. They challenge established mode of doing economy by *living* an alternative possibility, in the present space and time. I argue that this is a future-making practice, in particular, because of the impact it has on challenging the conceptual inevitability of dominant ways of being. Here, the future is not a distant destination with fixed ideals, instead, it is already being performed in an ongoing process of civic activism, incorporating diverse voices, and exploring the possibilities. In other words, these collectives open up the process of future-making to all, incorporating *other ways of knowing* in the process. Fundamental to their approach is staging it as collectively shaped futures. They have choreographed supportive practices for experimenting with futurity; it includes reviewing the history, encouraging intuition, embodied interaction, and more. Their motivation is to challenge taken for granted framings that are mischaracterizing their communities; they do so by

constructing *other* economies that reveal the plurality of the economy in which their voices are accurately and effectively captured.

In *Design for Pluriverse*, Escobar refers to *designing for life* as an open exploration of the future possibilities; “design in this sense does not transform the world, it is rather part of the world transforming itself” (Escobar, 2018, p. 215). Similarly, the emerging collectives introduced in this chapter are not promising a revolutionary transformation, rather their existence is a manifestation of an alternative future that is unfolding. This paper aims to address who gets to engage in future-making; what it takes to create settings that are explicitly plural; and what are the ways of mobilizing ecologies of participation to self-assemble for future-making.

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