

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Bellini, Rosanna and Strohmayer, Angelika (2020) Intersections of transformation. *Interactions*, 27 (5). pp. 76-78. ISSN 1072-5520

Published by: ACM

URL: <http://doi.org/10.1145/3414466> <<http://doi.org/10.1145/3414466>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/45015/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



UniversityLibrary

This forum is dedicated to exploring the notion of meaningfulness in design processes, taking the perspectives of community groups, nongovernmental organizations, and those who are marginalized in society as starting points. Authors will reflect conceptually and methodologically on practical engagements. — Rosanna Bellini and Angelika Strohmayer, Editors

Intersections of Transformation

Rosanna Bellini, Newcastle University, Angelika Strohmayer, Northumbria University

Type the word *translation* into any major search engine and chances are you will be greeted with resources to convert button presses on a keyboard from one language into another. Sure, anyone who's ever procrastinated on French homework might thrill at the ease of such a process. But by making this process seamless and ready-to-use, we might be missing a trick. Indeed, there is a growing corpus of critical work that examines how language gets “lost in translation”—of its subtlety, meaning, or significance—when converted from one dialect to another. We would argue that this mobilization of a single definition of the term *translation* is itself potentially (and ironically) one of those missed meanings, where the functional qualities of what it *should* do are prioritized over what it potentially *could* do. With this piece, we aspire to take you on a journey of discovery beyond the realms of functional conversion to an understanding of translation as a process of exciting transformation in research and design.

We propose that, in many situations, words can be understood not only as a mechanism to recall and communicate experience or knowledge, but also as a way of defining the reality we inhabit. This is because the words we use in our research hold a range of potential and actual consequences that can influence and shape technical policy, law, practice, design, and digital systems. When linguistic communication is positioned in this way, we have to acknowledge that we are codifying

and conceptualizing the world, setting the limits and opening possibilities for research, and therefore defining what counts as real [1]. We are not making the claim that this means what cannot be written down from our reality is by any means unreal, but rather stating plainly that the words we use communicate power. Words themselves do not inherently possess power but rather are bestowed their gravitas by the meanings they represent, the manners in which they are used, and the context in which they occur. As such, any processes that change the shape of those words or locations in which they appear are by their very nature powerful.

As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa states, “[W]ays of studying and representing things can have world-making effects” as we choose which parts of the world are important to absorb and convert into research artifacts [2]. We use *artifacts* as a placeholder to refer to anything tangible from research, such as reports, datasets, systems, or presentations. Indeed, if we *make* artifacts in this way through communicating our research, we have to then consider the core and often missed element of translation: that is,

Insights

- Words can be understood not only as a mechanism to recall and communicate experience or knowledge, but also as a way of defining the reality we inhabit.
- To ensure that charities have a stake in the translation of meaning and purpose, it is important to sense-check at every stage of the process.

evoking the making of meaning and also the conversion of making reality into research. For example, participants may have a conversation with a researcher. We note that this activity, transforming words or text into language, is rarely identified as the first instance of translation in action. The further hops in the process, such as transforming these interactions into data, data into results, results into designs, designs into systems, and systems into practices, potentially may be easier to identify. With so many spaces for translation—what we are terming *intersections of transformation*—following a traditional HCI research process has interesting implications for the practice of design and the practice of those whom we involve in our projects.

These theories and considerations not only influence the ways in which we communicate our work, but often are also at the heart of much of the practical work we do. Both of us regularly explore the role and use of digital technologies in collaboration with organizations and charities who support people in difficult life situations. This includes changing peoples’ own abusive behaviors toward others; in addition, it relates to improving well-being and safety, and in other cases working toward tackling stigma associated with the work people do or the difficult life situations in which they may find themselves.

Working across charities, third-sector services, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) means we are acutely aware of the different languages, politics, and legal structures embedded in how these organizations are named and described. For example, in the U.K.

there are tight budgetary, political, and organizational guidelines in place that make setting up a charity very different from another kind of organization that may function as part of the third sector. So translation becomes important in this setting even before we start interacting with people— understanding the terminology used (e.g., *charity* instead of *third-sector organization*) and translating this into funding applications and research contexts has a profound impact on the kinds of work the organizations are able to carry out.

However, one of the translations that is most difficult to us when working with organizations that support people: the understanding of what *useful* means. The meaning of this term is often discipline-specific within academia itself (leading to additional issues when communicating with people working in the inherently interdisciplinary field of HCI), and is further complicated when working with non-academic organizations. This is exacerbated when working in messy and complex settings such as the charitable sector, which supports people in difficult life situations and/or who are stigmatized. As feminist researchers, and building on Puig de la Bellacasa’s work, we don’t see usefulness only in terms of the utility of technologies or research to the organizations with whom we work, but also in terms of the ways in which we can be responsive to the time and financial restrictions of charitable organizations. Having said this, though, the ways in which we communicate the “usefulness” of our research to the partners in our ongoing projects, in future funding applications, in the development of new services, and in client engagement are paramount. Below, we present two examples that show how complex and temporal different definitions of *usefulness* are to the research partners with whom we work.

Working with non-academic organizations such as charities has always been the most rewarding, yet challenging part of our aspirations to design technologies for social good in our role as HCI researchers. This is because the success of projects often depends on researchers adapting to a role that many may have never



expected to embody: translator. While we might consider ourselves to be reasonably well-versed in transforming spreadsheets of data into a standardized paper for a conference or journal, we are perhaps even more motivated to cultivate an entirely different skill set: producing a meaningful artifact for a charitable organization. This is compounded within the current socioeconomic climate in the U.K., where this process of change and production has to rapidly respond to the ever-growing restraints on workers’ time and funders’ requirements of impact-evidence. While it may be tempting to understand translation only at the intersection of transforming data into novel findings for a research community, we acknowledge, alongside other work in this space [3], that this blurs and disempowers charities from having a stake in the conversion of meaning and purpose through their participation in our work. One way that Rosanna has sought to mitigate this in her doctoral work with charities is

The success of projects often depends on researchers adapting to a role that many may have never expected to embody: translator.

to include sense checking at every key stage of the translation process so that meaning, subtlety, and usefulness can be clearly identified. In doing so, we as researchers have to consider what types of methods are suitable for capturing and converting meanings into matter.

This then results in thinking about the ways in which we communicate the processes and outcomes of our research projects. Creating artifacts out of the analysis, such as visual reports of research projects, can also be a useful tool in the collaborative journey. The *use* of these reports isn’t always immediately clear, but we’ve received praise and gratitude for putting in the work and for highlighting the importance of collaborators’ input into the projects through authorship descriptors. Here, we want to reflect on one such report for Angelika’s doctoral project, the Partnership Quilt. The intended usefulness of the report was to document the project and to include information for others who may want to create a similar project, as well as to provide instructions on how to update the digital elements within the quilted blanket. Almost immediately after the report was completed and printed into a small booklet, it became clear that its *use* was in sharing the research back to participants, to give them an idea of how much work they had put into it and to have a visual record of the research. Looking back at this project from 2017, however, it has become clear that the

report, and the potential of sharing the project through its existence, has been useful for much more strategic developments within the service.

Participatory methods are perhaps even more important in these kinds of settings than in others, as they help to acknowledge and disassemble traditional power relationships in research settings. These approaches allow us to negotiate roles and languages, to work toward ways in which we create projects, artifacts, data, and outcomes that are useful for researchers *and* charities alike. In turn, this allows us to consider the processes and the end products that an effective transformation might take in different ways. We identified that often this kind of translational work happens throughout the projects, not simply at the end, and that it is integral to the kinds of work we do.

Our research has in many cases become part of service-delivery ecologies, or has been designed to fill a specific need or want within the organizations with which we work. Indeed, the process of conducting research transforms a space normally held for data capture into a space for active reflection on a charity's aspirations, goals, and means of achieving these [4,5].

From positioning research as being useful to both academic and non-academic partners, and creating artifacts that have value beyond research alone, we learn that it is not actually the *outcome* of a translation that is most important; rather, it is the *process* of working on the translation that is most useful. While it might be understood that research is as good as the end result and what it can lead to, we found that the process of capturing and performing the research produces the transformational world-making effects that exceed the tangible outcomes, moving beyond understanding research as a means to an end.

In touch with other feminist approaches, there is a need to focus on process rather than outcome, with a focus on reflexive practice, on action and doing, and on seeing the process as a necessity to learn. As part of this work, we constantly negotiate the translations from the actions of doing

research into the digital and nondigital artifacts we produce—reflecting on the meanings academically but also in practical terms for the organizations we serve and with which we collaborate. When we pose translation as a utility that has fixed inputs and outputs, it can be challenging to see that what we are doing continuously as researchers and designers is truly transformational.

Looking at translations as a process also means we explore the ways in which we transform meaning and meaning-making, as we have discussed throughout this article. As researchers, this outlook gives us the confidence to continue the work we are doing. It encourages us to continuously learn about what we are doing, reflect on the processes, and develop new understandings as we are doing this work.

When looking at our work and seeing that the processes involved in translating may be more important than the outcome of that translational work, it gives us the opportunity to engage in the kind of world-making research engagements that Puig de la Bellacasa explores. And to do this in ways that we and our collaborators see as most beneficial based on our skills and resources. It also allows us to engage in work that relates to the worlds we want to see and be a part of—to enact a prefigurative politic to proactively create, develop, and engage with the worlds we want to see.

In a way, we are tapping into the feminist tradition of working toward a constantly changing and adapting end, of working toward something where the work may never be finished. Especially when working with third-sector organizations or other community groups who support people and their rights, or who promote the movements toward more just worlds, the work is never done. We hope that our projects support the ongoing development of these worlds we want to live within, but we are acutely aware that we won't be able to do it all. Knowing this influences the ways in which we work, the ways in which we understand the usefulness of our research and writing, and the ways in which we end projects. It also influences the ways in which we

aim to create caring, knowledgeable, compassionate, and proactive solidarity for those who are affected by existing and developing oppressions. There is always work left to be done, whether or not it is us who do it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Both co-authors contributed equally to this article.

ENDNOTES

1. Radford, J., Friedberg, M., and Harne, L. *Women, Violence, and Strategies for Action: Feminist Research, Policy, and Practice*. Open Univ. Press, 2000.
2. de la Bellacasa, M.P. Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things. *Social Studies of Science* 41, 1 (2011), 85–106; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312710380301>
3. Vines, J., Clarke, R., Wright, P., McCarthy, J., and Olivier, P. Configuring participation: On how we involve people in design. *Proc. of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2013, 429; <https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2470716>
4. Bellini, R., Strohmayer, A., Olivier, P., and Crivellaro, C. Mapping the margins: Navigating the ecologies of domestic violence service provision. *Proc. of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2019, 1–13; <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300352>
5. Strohmayer, A., Laing, M., and Comber, R. Justice-oriented ecologies: A framework for designing technologies with sex work support services. *Routledge International Handbook of Sex Industry Research*. Routledge, 2019, 544–555; <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351133913-53>

Rosanna Bellini is a Ph.D. researcher in digital civics exploring how digital tools and services can be designed, deployed, and incorporated into domestic violence interventions for people who use violence in intimate relationships. She works in collaboration with charities in the U.K. that deliver sensitive services to mitigate harm against vulnerable populations.
→ r.f.bellini@newcastle.ac.uk

Angelika Strohmayer is an interdisciplinary technology researcher, working closely with third-sector organizations and other stakeholders to creatively integrate digital technologies in service delivery and advocacy work. She aims to work collaboratively on in-the-world projects that engage people at all stages of the research process to engender change toward a more just world.
→ angelika.strohmayer@northumbria.ac.uk