Flame talk

Future Design & Digital media

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Hi, goodmorning.

The title of today's talk is Future Design and Digital Media in a city context. While preparing for this talk, I realised this title could trigger at least two strands of thoughts.

The first one is something which I would refer to as being a celebration of technological possibilities. To me, this discourse is the story we hear most often - the wonderful world of virtual and augmented reality, virtual assistants, robots and other 'smart' devices.

A second interpretation of Future Design and Digital Media could be a more critical stance, where questions are asked to what extend technology is impacting human interactions. Although we are all digitally connected, there seems to be a constant cry for authentic, real, social interactions.

To my feeling, this more critical approach is voiced a lot less. Which is why I want to approach today's talk from that point of view.

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My name is Dries, and I work at the creative agency Studio Dott. We are based in Antwerp, Belgium and have a satellite office in Hong Kong. Our team consists of 22 people, who mostly have a background in design.

Studio Dott is a company with a lot of different activities, centered around the design of products, interiours and experiences. This might seem very diverse, but there is once element that glues our projects together. That is that we always start from the user point of view.

That means, in an ideal case, that when we start a project - we don't really know what the end result will be. It can be a combination of an interior design and a digital application, or a physical product part of a redesigned service model.

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A week or so ago, I had an interesting chat with Michael when he introduced me to the FLAME project. We chatted about the design of a media provisioning platform, and how it can be approached in top town and bottom up ways. The central element in all of this is the

city, in which a plethora of interactions take place. Understanding these interactions is essential to building any platform. It is about these interactions that I would like to spend some time on, to get a better grasp on the city as a system.

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When I learned about the FLAME project, the interesting thing, I found, is that the envisioned FLAME platform should be top down and bottom up at the same time. People should be able to consume media, but also be enabled to participate and construct media. This is exactly what we see happening with social media platforms, where 'influencers' create consumable media. The boundaries between a consumer and a producer are, however, very vague and probably switch over time.

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When designing such a platform in a city context, some good parallels can be drawn. To illustrate this, I want to open up what 'media' might mean within a city. What immediately shows is that the spectrum of media in a city is enourmous. There are data points, coming from sensors or actuators - they can be addressed or they can push their data. There could be media items linked to geolocations. But there are also people around, sending messages or expressing emotions. This last category is something a lot harder to 'make sense of' on a technical level.

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To understand this better, I keep two metaphors in my head.

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The Grid and The Shire. Are these terms familiar to everyone? They both refer to cities, with a very different atmosphere. The Grid comes from the movie Tron and The Shire from the movie The Lord of The Rings.

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The Grid looks like this. It's very functional and efficient. There's a lot of data around, and interactions with this city are prescribed. I think of this as the ultimate example of a top down city. In our current environment, we are very good at building grid cities. Some examples

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Open data portals. Cities, large and small, increasingly publish this. I used two examples of Belgian cities here, this is Ghent - with a very diverse open data portal. When I see this, it's interesting at first. But what I always think is that this platform does not tell me what I can do with it. It's driven in a top down way, and I - as a citizen - am not triggered at all to act upon any of the data presented.

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When I was looking at the open data portal of the city of Antwerp, I found this dataset, which is a dataset containing an overview of all datasets available on the open data portal. Data inception, you could say.

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There are better examples, like the London datastore. The only thing they add is make the data human readable, by adding some historical graphs. At least I get a feel for what is being collected here. Still, to most people this kind of data representation is not actionable.

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A second example of Grid City thinking are sensor networks.

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I'm here showing a recent screenshot of thingful, an online aggregator of sensor data in cities and places all around the world. Again, this gives a good overview of the state of things, it is informative and if I know what I should look for - I will probably find it. But these kind of platform representations do not cover the full stack. They do not engage people in using this data.

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British designer Ross Atkin created a more extreme illustration of this, in his clever city manifesto. What he shows is that what we currently refer to as 'the smart city' very much looks like technology overlords pushing buttons and switching levers. In this vision, 'media' is offered as consumption material - it is very much a one way communication, and is little engaging.

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The other type of city is the Shire. This is the extreme other end of the spectrum, where there is mostly focus on Ad Hoc interaction, based on emotions. Interactions are about

people. In this kind of city, there is a lot of human interaction and conversation and it happens in a very chaotic and messy way. What does this mean if we throw media technology in the mix?

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Time to revisit sensor networks. It can be done differently.

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Airbezen is a project in Antwerp, Belgium to which I do not have a direct relation, but I like to use it as an example. This project is all about air quality sensing. But they way that they do this, is somewhat non-conventional. This project uses strawberry plants as sensors. This is done by analysing the leaves of the plants. And although that the data output is perhaps similar to what an air quality sensor would measure, the whole idea of giving out plants to people is a cue for social engagement. People start talking about air quality, they understand what the data shows because they feel like they are part of the process. It might be less real time, but it for sure is more engaging and triggering people to take action.

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Another example of an interpretation of a sensor network closer to people is Field Papers. This initiative takes map data from openstreetmaps, and transforms it into a printable map.

The idea is that people gather in groups, and go round their neighbourhoods and manually (in an analogue way) annotate this map. Later on, they can either scan the map and upload it to openstreetmap editors who can enter the data - or people are engaged in openstreetmap editing workshops.

The interesting thing here is the social activity, which triggers people to understand why collecting this data makes sense. It enables them to think about the possibilities.

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Another type of example is about storytelling

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This project is a couple of years old, and was set up by PAN studio in Bristol, UK. The idea is super simple, it allows anyone in the city to attach media content to street furniture like lamp posts or benches. Basically anything that has a city identification number on it. In this way, people could have conversations with each other mediated through city objects.

This is not efficient at all, it is super chaotic, but it does engage people to get out of their houses and discover their local environment. It engages people to take action, and triggers participation in digital media production and consumption at the same time.

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Coming back to Ross Atkin, who we saw before - instead of talking about 'smart' cities he introduces the term Clever Cities. These kind of 'Shire'-like cities are much more engaging, as they look for ways for people and digital media technology to live side by side.

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I think that it is important to understand that both top down and bottom up approaches to technology and media in cities have their value. I think it is evenly important to be aware of both ends of this spectrum, because otherwise we will end up with a distinct 'gap' as is shown here

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When designing something for people, it often comes down to what Jon Kolko writes in his book 'well designed'. It is about simple things, that have a soul, and which people can relate to emotionally. Because that is easier said than done, I want to end this talk with an example of how I have tried to make this happen in a case example.

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The last months, I have been involved in three city trials in which we have experimented with novel formats of citizen participation. Cities are increasingly looking for ways to engage with their citizens, obviously online digital media do seem very interesting in that context. The problem, however, is that getting people to engage in yet another digital platform is not easy. Definitely not when these people are above a certain age, or are too busy checking their facebook and instragram feeds.

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To engage with citizens in a different way, we built this physical installation. It's a contemporary adaptation of the phone booth, in which all interaction happens using a phone handset and one large illuminated button.

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By picking up the handset, you - as a citizen - are asked to answer a pre-recorded question. This question can be about an idea the city council has such as a new mobility plan or an urban planning project.

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People listen to the question, and reply using voice. In this way, people are invited to engage in conversation with the city - mediated through a physical object. It probably is not the most efficient object, but it is something close to the people. Kids like to play with it, this screws up our data, but there's interaction going on.

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This phone booth is connected to the internet, and we try to make sense of what people are saying. I won't go into the details, but we're basically semi-automatically transcribing all audio

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Using linguistic analysis techniques such as n-grams we look for patters or common topics in the dataset.

Although this might nog exactly be the type of media the FLAME project wants to cover,

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So, to wrap up. When we're taking about the future of design and digital media

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We should be aware of the context of use. When you want to cover the full stack, from end user to backend system, knowing in which contexts something will be used is essential. Are people doing something at home, or whilst riding their bicycle? Being aware of this, is critical.

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Unscripted. By this I mean that media providers need to trigger people in interpreting things. It is about providing cues for interaction, much more than it is about carefully taking people by the hand and having them use a system in a way

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Actionable. Data platforms are the new black, in any sector. It is not only about making something available, but it is also about showing how engagement can be achieved. This enables a two way dialogue, it allows top down usage but also engages bottom up interaction.

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To close, this John Thackara quote kind of says it all. Engaging emotionally will be the key for the next generation. In my talk I attempted to show some example of how this can be applied and worked with. And on that note, I would like to thank you for your attention.

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Thanks!