## FORUM THE NEXT BILLION

This is a forum for perspectives on designing for communities marginalized by economics, social status, infrastructure, or policies. It will discuss design methods, theoretical and conceptual contributions, and methodological engagements for underserved communities. — **Nithya Sambasivan, Editor** 

# The Fallacy of Good: Marginalized Populations as Design Motivation

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he American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) runs a webcast series called Design for Good whose focus areas are design for democracy, diversity and inclusion, women in leadership, and design for communities [1]. AIGA offers links to a host of organizations that work in the design-for-good space, offering services ranging from renting designers' time, to specializing in marketing and visual presentation for community and socialjustice organizations. Similar online and physical events encouraging designers to "make a difference" abound; the notion of design for good has grown in industry as well as in government and academia in recent decades.

Clearly, some clever design has sought ways to fix out-of-market problems. This includes designs such as low-cost or energy-efficient handcranked appliances for populations lacking resources, as well as low-cost prosthetics and healthcare diagnostic devices. While these innovations indeed offer benefits to those who need them, the broader trend of viewing the needs of marginalized populations as an object of design experimentation is problematic and merits reflection.

IMAGE BY DESIGN FOR AMERICA

The politics of expertise—the perception of technology and technologists as holding superior solutions to society's problems—is at the very heart of science and technology studies [2]. Morgan Ames [3], building on sociologist Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority [4], proposed that certain technologies gain mindspace based on



Some of the many challenges discussed and explored before choosing a final topic for Design for America's Leadership Studio.

their charismatic appeal rather than their immediate relevance to a problem at hand. Technological solutions can captivate. Consequently, designers with the best intentions are likely to be surprised by the realization that technological fixes to problems, evidently superior on their value propositions as clinically defined,

#### Insights

- → Working to transform the lives of the marginalized through hackathons or design-for-good initiatives is unlikely to make a dent in the complex problems of the world.
- → But research and practice in this space can offer designers valuable gains in breadth, methodological expertise, analytical skills, and overall employability.

should find few takers on the ground.

The notion of design for social good implies an intentionality—it is for good. To accomplish this, a population or domain must be understood in depth. However, design-for-good initiatives are generally disaggregated from the populations of need. While we pay lip service to notions of participatory design, the vast majority of events or exercises fitting the design-for-good paradigm do not take place in situ or with active collaboration with partner groups (more power to you if your work does not fit this model). When they do, they tend to be in limited, short-term engagements.

Scholarly social research typically requires that "experts" immerse themselves deeply in a field of study before proposing any contribution to a real-world

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problem. Business consulting, on the other hand, may require a practitioner to have a grasp of a set of tools and hone a general, domain-independent approach toward studying problems before applying solutions. Government departments that rotate civil servants through their functional arms may have even lighter requirements for domain expertise, and yet they are allowed to make decisions with weighty consequences for the affected populations.

There is of course no fixed designer entity. Rather, there is a range of design professionals, from consultancies who bring an amorphous design thinking to a range of problems, on one hand, to designers in scholarly research who typically work on a narrow set of specialized problems, on the other. The vast majority of design professionals will probably find themselves in roles along this spectrum throughout their careers. When we think of a designer working on "good," they may well be a lifelong investor in the subject, or one whose engagement is limited to a shorter time span.

As designers, our practice most often involves taking on a problem, proposing a solution, and then moving on to the next thing to be solved. Indeed, the practice of designers is not the same as that of sociologists, for instance, or policymakers commenting on welfare schemes for underserved populations. Yet it still bears exploring how well one needs to know a community or a setting before engaging in activities that have a direct impact on them.

# MAINSTREAM TO GOOD ON A USER SPECTRUM

Design for good proposes improvements in the condition or functioning of the user population of a design artifact. This definition loosely encompasses cases in which the target population for the design artifact is a user group somewhat atypical from the norm of "mainstream" adopters.

The mainstream user is usually the most likely target of mass-marketed technologies, by which definition the "good" user is then someone outside the primary market. Thus defined, good user populations could fit into one of three broad typologies.

First, they could be marginal as defined economically, such as

the poor, the homeless, or those engaged in precarious work. Such users may be unable to afford the technology or be structurally exposed to other vulnerabilities. Second, user populations could be defined as marginal in terms of faculties needed to interact with the technology, such as people with sensory impairments, people who are illiterate, or people who are technology-phobic or otherwise unable to fully use the affordances of a technology as designed. Finally, good can be applied to user populations in geographical terms, such as people living in remote areas where the technology is not easily accessible, or in parts of low- and middle-income regions who may not have been originally conceptualized as users of a technology.

The semantic positioning of good would imply that the goal of such projects is typically to alleviate the "not good" of the population. But the outcome can just as well be for the good of a product, or of a design professional or process. There is an alluring logic to having design and good intersect, in much the same way that social enterprise as a concept tells us we can make money indefinitely and never let it interfere with doing good for the world.

The necessary question here is whether the design (including the much-feted ultra-simple design) gets rewarded for its creativity, or whether the measurable achievement of social good is the goal of the design.

#### WHY DESIGN FOR GOOD IS BOOMING

There are several reasons why design work in this space has been expanding. First, there are a number of major corporations that see populations thus defined as potential users of their goods and services. The "typical" user of design artifacts is a shapeshifting entity, making design that is agile to a breadth of use cases circumspect, if not a necessary means of engaging

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with customers. Designing with constraints in mind sometimes leads to serendipitous outcomes, as in the case of accessible design. Many products originally designed for people who require non-standard interfaces have eventually been used for mainstream populations interested in multimodal interactions. Speech recognition is one such area. The practice of design for atypical users may be approached differently depending on the size and setting of a design team. Large corporations can send their headquarters design teams to work through their satellite operations by engaging field partners, whereas smaller firms or design teams may contract specialized design consultancies. In the industry, such work is often driven by product-shipping deadlines.

Second, the education system has been a major driver of design for good, especially during the formative years of a designer's training. The academy is invested in social good—universities are in the business of making the world a better place, or at least telling their students that they will. Thus, students of design can expect some exposure to doing design work for social rather than for purely commercial ends. A range of design-for-good projects have emerged as part of capstone classes or research projects in academic institutions throughout the U.S., for instance. However, because schools have a semester/quarter orientation, students are used to starting, delving deep into, and imagining they have gained reasonable expertise in a topic by the end of a semester. Two classes in a subject is halfway to a minor in the area of work. All of Japanese cooking, for instance, is offered at my local community college—as a singlesemester class.

Third, there is a larger notion of technology for good that is driven by governments, media, philanthropies, and a range of institutions centered around the potential of technology for creating a just society. This is articulated through a phenomenal growth in hackathons, technology and development conferences, and informal events such as meetups. The specter of technology changing the world is ingrained into our collective psyche; it can be seductive to people who work in design and technology for the place of pride it lends their professional practice. However, as I have argued in greater depth [5], we have erroneously reversed the value directionality in design for good. The immediate, predictable value of these initiatives is likely to come to the designers rather than to the objects of their work—the recipients of "good."

#### HANDS OFF DETROIT, YOU CANADIANS

I frequently start a class on technology and development here at the University of Michigan by asking my students how they would feel about a proposal from Canada to help revitalize parts of ailing Detroit. Frequently mythicized as an eightmile allegory of postapocalyptic decay porn from our wealthy suburb of Ann Arbor, Detroit is invariably owned as ours in outraged response to this question. "Who are the Canadians to fix our problems? Who said Detroit was ailing?"

When we think of design initiatives to help some marginalized group, say, refugees, then we risk objectifying that group. When we think in terms of outcomes, we tend to focus on the nature of the marginality. Thus, the act of good or the population in need of the good becomes the central point of our engagement. This is problematic in design thinking, since our typical expertise is in evaluating and producing user outcomes. The refugees and how their lives change because of a digital artifact should not be the focus of design for good; the design artifact and how usable it is are what matters.

But technology design and adoption in the real world present an entirely different scale of complexities that do not allow for a linear or practiced set of solutions to the problems stated. Designers cannot be expected to spend several years gaining deep appreciation of some social domain or population, and if they did do that, it is not clear that the learnings from one setting would translate well to others. When we propose that a design artifact will fix, or even ameliorate, the challenges of a lived social experience such as homelessness, marginal farming, or disability, we pitch ourselves—the designers—as the ones with the answer. Social good is serious business. People with careers dedicated to work on these issues, or communities that deal with these issues as part of their lives, have experience that is difficult to transfer into the frames of bounded engagement involved in short-term design endeavors.

#### HOW TO BE GOOD

However, if we set aside the social claims and outcomes of good (and at the very least focus on doing no harm), a lot of benefits can come from engaging with diverse populations of users:

• Breadth benefits. Working to fulfill the needs of a diverse user base gives us a design constraint to work with. The natural outcome of this is that we are forced to examine our creativity alongside our need for our design to be accessible to a broad range of stakeholders. Being a worldly professional also helps to broaden our exposure to design thinking, which extends beyond an artifact to an understanding of the ecosystems in which technologies exist.

• *Methodological benefits*. Such work may include engaging populations who are excluded from having a voice in design decisions; therefore, they may have a harder time articulating their needs. Working with this kind of diversity in user research *helps designers be better interviewers and design observers* since it forces us to think deeply about what is needed to engage more fruitfully with atypical users of our products.

• Analytical benefits. Working on issues with diverse users is useful for prompting designers to be reflective of their own agency as builders of products that people will sometimes be forced to adjust their practices around, particularly when these products end up defining the industry standard.

• *Employability benefits*. Working on issues such as accessibility adds an important skill set that corporations value, for making their products used as widely as possible but also for ensuring *compliance with accessibility* requirements. Practice working with atypical user populations or use-case scenarios offers benefits to designers and user experience professionals, making us more well-rounded as professionals and, by extension, more attractive to design research and practice contexts in the industry and academy.

As a community of designers, we know how to build products and research their use. In this role, we are qualified to speak for the interactions we examine, not for the people who participate in our work in broader contexts. The case for appropriately recognizing the limits of design does not just build humility; it also gives us a sense of the impacts we can have through our work, and what may lie beyond it. Each user encounter makes us slightly better at understanding how we can improve our work for all, instead of perfecting it for one group we choose to serve.

I do not argue against working on the problems engendered in the design for good universe. Quite the contrary. I strongly advocate more exposure of designers to issues of diversity in their design practice. What I question is the terminology and intentionality of the notion of design for good. When we accept that such work benefits us, we can pay attention to what we do as a practice—designing usable products—instead of setting our goals at the transformative value we imagine offering to the user.

#### ENDNOTES

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