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Tekogul, Irem

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Making hopeful futures: Critical hope and radical imagination in design

Irem Tekogul

Future visions embody our hopes and dreams, worries and fears about what is yet to come. While approaches such as speculative design, experiential futures and design fiction are more explicit about their commitment to exploring alternative futures, all design(ing) is oriented towards the future. However, increasing precarity, which is defined as a profound and objective uncertainty over the future, so that "there will be no future" becomes the dominant vision (Pulcini, 2020). While design is seen as giving form to futures (Mazé, 2016), design theorist Tony Fry cautions that designers have been complicit in what he terms defuturing, which means the negation of the world's futures (2020). Then, in the face of increasing precarity, how can we re-orient towards designing hopeful futures instead of defuturing? Following Arjun Appadurai (2013), I join the call for reframing hope as a politics of action to make futures otherwise. Hope, in this sense, is not passive wishing or waiting but a factor in mobilising collective action for alternative futures. At the same time, fictional expectations about the future can be used to cement the present-day status quo. Thus, it matters what hopes we are designing with or whose hopes we are weaving into future visions. To begin exploring these questions, I examine future-oriented design practices and investigate how hope is embedded, materialised and enacted in future-making. I draw on data from an ethnographic field study of the design laboratory at the Silicon Valley Research and Development division of a multi-national technology company. In this presentation, I critically reflect on the role hope plays in future making and explore emerging design practices that highlight possibilities to employ hope for catalysing systemic change.

KEYWORDS: futures thinking, strategic foresight, politics of hope, innovation

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Economics & Organizations, Sociotechnical Systems

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Visions of desirable futures

Our age is defined by the condition of ever-increasing uncertainty. Pulcini (2020) argues that global risks such as climate change, nuclear threats, and misuse of commons "expose humankind to a condition of global vulnerability". This condition leads to precariousness: a profound and objective uncertainty over the future to the extent that "there will be no future" becomes a dominant vision (ibid.). Similarly, Tony Fry (2020 [1999], p.10) argues that defuturing, as the negation of world futures, is "a key characteristic of our anthropocentricity". Yet, recognising precarity, and our connected vulnerability can be the starting point to imagine hopeful futures. According to Anna Tsing, "In a global state of precarity, we don't have choices other than looking for life in this ruin (2015). Hope, then, is essential for living in/with precarity and opening up possibilities for otherwise.

Visions of desirable futures affect technological trajectories in tangible ways. These visions are not benign illustrations of what the future could look like, but they inform what futures get made. Ideas and images of the future influence purposeful future-oriented human activity by informing decisions that are made in the present, which eventually play a role in the realisation of that future (Voros, 2007). Beckert (2016) argues that fictional expectations or visions, which are representations of positive future states, are a determining factor of our neo-liberal society and that power in society depends on who creates and controls these visions. Theoretical concepts from the sociology of expectations, affective economy and science and technology studies allow us to critically examine how expectations, visions and speculative fictions entrench dominant narratives of sociotechnical progress and foreclose possibilities for alternative futures.

Hope resists and challenges the neo-liberal present by inviting scrutiny of existing political structures and dissent and opening up possibilities of different futures that

remained foreclosed (Olson & Worsham, 2016). In The Future as Cultural Fact, Appadurai calls for reframing politics of hope (2013). He argues that hope, instead of passive wishing or waiting, affirms agency mobilises action for converting uncertainty to risk, seizing opportunities for collaborating and experimenting to make a desirable future possible. Similarly, Haivan and Khasnabish view radical imagination as not only about dreaming of alternative futures but also about inspiring action and new forms of solidarity in the present (2014). However, as explained above, fictional expectations about the future can also be used to cement the present-day status quo. Thus, it matters what hopes we are designing with or whose hopes we are weaving into future visions.

Methods

To begin exploring these questions, I examine future-oriented design practices and investigate how hope is embedded, materialised, and enacted in future-making. I draw on data from an ethnographic field study of the design laboratory at the Silicon Valley Research and Development division of a multi-national technology company and the role hope plays in future making and explore emerging design practices that highlight opportunities to think with hope for systemic transformation. Like in many others, in this organisation, “the future” is seen as a commodity that can be owned or exchanged. Corporate future visions enact certain kinds of hope and expectations, which further stabilise current discourses about technoscientific progress. Since the organisation changed its R&D strategy to prioritise social innovation and societal transformation in 2016, foresight or, more broadly, futures thinking gained more prominence.

Dissenting-within

While corporate foresight has more traditionally aimed at improving firm performance, the recent focus on societal transformation requires shifting attention to a broader set of future-making practices. I find that there are emerging future-oriented design practices that employ radical imagination and critical hope and that dare to dream otherwise futures. I find that these practices are a form of *dissenting within*, and futures that are made through these practices challenge dominant sociotechnical imaginaries

that are recreated through established corporate foresight methods. Thus, visions of hopeful futures are sometimes at odds with corporate futures. Additionally, these emerging practices differ from corporate foresight methods by recognising the messy, situated, and reflexive nature of future-making. This enables stakeholders who engage in future-making to reflect on their hopes and worries and orient their actions in the present.

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Author

Irem Tekogul, PhD Candidate, Illinois Institute of Design, itekogul@id.iit.edu