Theater of the Techno-Oppressed

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Abstract

Theater of the Techno-Oppressed workshop aims to raise critical consciousness on digital services' role in structuring oppression relations in everyday life, mainly how it constrains our bodies to physical and political posturing that accepts oppression as an inevitable deed. Dating apps, ride-hailing apps, digital labor platforms, video streaming, and social networks depend on users lingering at specific postures several times a day to meet their not-so-clear ends. Informed by Science & Technology Studies (STS) and instrumentalized by Embodied Interaction Design, Theater of the Techno-Oppressed builds upon the work of Augusto Boal, a dramaturg born in Rio de Janeiro. The workshop participants experiment with theater techniques to identify, analyze, discuss, and speculate reactions to technology-mediated oppression. At the end of the workshop, the participants discuss and compare that experience with other embodied interaction design methods — such as bodystorming — and speculate on further applications in Service Design.

Keywords: Oppression; Theater; Embodied Interaction Design; STS.

Workshop description

Theater of the Techno-Oppressed extends the Theater of the Oppressed arsenal developed by Augusto Boal (1979) to fight oppression in Latin America and other parts of the world. Informed by Science and Technology Studies (STS) and instrumentalized by some practices from Embodied Interaction Design (Dourish, 2004), this praxis highlight the role of technology in mediating oppression relations between privileged and disenfranchised social groups (Vieira Pinto, 2005).

Theater has this unique capacity to express the materiality of mediated interaction so that the general public can join the debate on technology. Contemporary debates center around algorithmic racism, gendered interfaces, satisfaction and anxiety triggers, privacy threats, mass surveillance, digital exclusion, and many more. Service Design sometimes frames these debates as wicked problems that can be solved by design thinkers (Saito et al., 2022); however, many times they find out that these debates are unsolvable. Critical pedagogies in design education (Serpa et al., 2022) have succesfully experimented with Theater of the Oppressed to engage the public in such debates without solving them. The approach might be applicable to other fields.

The workshop participants will use theater techniques to identify, analyze, discuss, and elaborate reactions to oppressive interactions while using a certain kind of technology. Impersonating the technology is crucial to realizing its functionalities, biases, and infrastructure (Gonzatto & Van Amstel, 2017). The actor impersonator acts toward the other actors like a scripted robot, a virtual assistant, or a physical machine (Figure 1). Others, in turn, interact with the technology through the metaphorical body interface: they get information from the technology (inter)face, from which they pull arms as if they were levers, press the chest as if they were buttons, and talk as if they could receive voice commands. The oppressive nature of the interaction typically becomes more apparent when the designers show up on stage and disclose their intentions when trying to fix the technology.

Embodying technology is a way to deconstruct from the inside out both the discourse of neutrality and technological determinism that depoliticize Service Design (Van Amstel & Secomandi, forthcoming) and Interaction Design (Van Amstel & Gonzatto, 2022). On one side, the spect-actor discovers technology's origins, privilege structures, configurations, and functionalities by thinking and acting as a technology.

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On the other side, the spect-actor explores how these constitutive aspects can be transformed through the critical appropriation of technology (Vieira Pinto, 2005) for different ends. This way, participants can figure out their position on the user oppression (Gonzatto & Van Amstel, 2022) and develop new intentions to dismantle it.

Figure 1: Forum theater on the silent driving feature of Uber Comfort held in IHC 2019 (Van Amstel, 2019).

Theater of the Techno-Oppressed can be used with social movements and communities looking for critical appropriation of digital technologies in building collaborative services. Platform cooperatives, solidarity economy enterprises, community associations, and art collectives are some possible organizations that may make use of it. It is also a great educational tool to let future designers learn to position themselves critically regarding oppression relations (Van Amstel, 2019). In contrast with bodystorming and other Embodied Interaction Design methods, Theater of the Oppressed invites political (and politicized) design bodies (Angelon and Van Amstel, 2021) to enter the stage, bringing over racial, gender, class, condition, and handiness relations implied in Service Design.

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Session set-up

Following the critical pedagogy approach of the Design & Oppression Network (Serpa et al., 2019), the proponents act as complicators, the opposite of facilitators. This role provides examples of using theater techniques to discuss technology-mediation issues, and the participants mimic and develop them further. The techniques rely on improvisation and everyday body language. There are no written scripts or memorized lines, as it relies mainly on silent acting. Due to that simple set-up, people who usually do not feel confident with acting on stage can feel confident with acting against oppression as part of a collective work.

Space requirements

Requirements: A room with open space or stackable chairs/tables. A traditional theater stage is not required.

Number of participants: it depends on the room size. A 20 square meters room can host up to 10 participants. The larger the room, the better.

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Convenors bio:

Convenor 1: Frederick van Amstel is Assistant Professor of Service Design and Experience Design at UTFPR, where he co-founded the local hub of the Design &

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Oppression Network. Frederick is also a Theater of the Oppressed curinga trained by Centro do Teatro do Oprimido (CTO) in Rio de Janeiro.

Convenor 2: Bibiana Oliveira Serpa holds a PhD in Design from ESDI/UERJ. In recent years, she participated in several community development projects across Latin America, acted as a popular educator in the Brazilian feminist movement, and cofounded the Design & Oppression Network.