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As told to Willa Köerner, 3281 words.

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Caroline Sinderson on how talking to people improves your work

Your area of expertise—as both a researcher and as an artist—is super niche. I assume you didn’t plan on being an anti-harassment designer when you were starting out. How did you come to do what you do?

It is super niche. I haven’t met any other anti-harassment designers. In terms of how I got started, I got my masters at the Interactive Telecommunications Program. I went to ITP to work specifically with Clay Shirky, who became my academic advisor. I just wanted to take a bunch of Clay’s classes, and see what was going on. I was a portrait photographer and photojournalist then. As we were all beginning to push our content online, I was really interested in how people were misusing these online platforms. For example, I was a part of a Flickr group in which members were exchanging clothes with each other, as opposed to selling clothes on Ebay. I knew at the time that we were misusing this platform, and I just thought, “This is so exciting.”

While at ITP, I started to look at how people were organizing protests through social media. This was around the time of the Arab Spring and the Green Revolution. I also started making video games for fun, to take my photographic practice into something involving technology that wasn’t just an interactive slideshow. I wanted to understand, how do you actually make technology? How do you make photography really interesting with technology without making it about computation, and without making it about inserting an image into a blog or website?

Your work has a unique position in between a lot of different practices. There’s research, there’s interaction design, then there’s visual art and photography. How do you intertwine all these different practices?

My practice is still very rooted in being a photojournalist. When you approach a story that’s going to be published by a journalistic entity, you have to do a bit of research beforehand—you have to be aware of the environment you’re entering, how you’re going to talk to the person you’re photographing, and how you’re going to distill the story into a handful of shots to be used alongside a series of words, right?

A photo-journalistic practice involves asking a lot of questions. What are the implications of the photographs you’re taking? What do they say? How truthful are they, and what is the truth in this situation? I think my practice is still very similar to that process. A lot of the artwork I do involves talking to people, and trying to create a ground truth using qualitative and quantitative data. So I think my practice, especially because it’s so research-driven, really does come from this background I had in photojournalism. I just don’t use a camera anymore.

Since you’re not using a camera, and therefore don’t have a body of photos as the clear result of your practice, how do you decide what form all of the research should ultimately take?

I think about my practice from three different standpoints: How do I make something that’s really practical? How do I do something that’s activist-driven? How do I do something that then manifests into art? So based on practicality, the outcome of my research might be writing an article, because that’s something that can be cited for other researchers. One of the main reasons I write, other than the fact that I like it, is I recognize that having something published means it can be referenced. It can be referenced on Wikipedia, for example, it can be referenced in books, it can be referenced in other talks people give. So, writing grounds a lot of the research I do, and also makes it real.

So you’re almost taking a user-experience approach to what art you should make.

Totally. My piece Social Media Breakup Coordinator resulted from doing a bunch of user interviews with victims affected by Gamer Gate, and from a series of talks about how online harassment is a privacy problem. Then a friend of mine went through a really tough time. She was assaulted by someone she was dating, and they broke up. She was describing all this pain she was experiencing inside of Facebook, just from seeing him. It sounded so much like the emotional and residual pain that the victims of Gamer Gate had gone through. Even though these were different situations, it sounded like a lot of the same trauma, and a lot of the same design problems.



Caroline Sindors as the social media breakup coordinator, in a session at Babycastles.

A lot of Social Media Breakup Coordinator came out of the practicality and the activist standpoint. Once I realized that I had all this knowledge for dealing with different forms of internet trauma, my user research manifested into this art project. Then, that project led me to start thinking about other, different kinds of internet trauma. Like, what do you do when a friend has passed away and there are artifacts of them on the internet? That resulted in a piece for Fusion that's still a project I come back to a lot. I guess in my practice, I just keep asking questions. What do you do if you do see an abusive ex-boyfriend on the internet? What do you do if you are the victim of a harassment campaign? What do you do when you leave a job and it was really awkward, and you don't really want to be friends with your coworkers, like, what do you do?

When you expose these voids in tech companies' user-experience design, is it your job to bring awareness to them in a way that helps them be resolved? Or is your only responsibility to make the work, and let others decide how to handle it?

It's the former. I think if you're a technologist and a critical thinker, it's one thing to just criticize —why not go the extra step and then hypothesize? Why not imagine what a solution could be? I also think it's important to try to imagine what the problems with any solution might be.

My day job involves presenting ideas and solutions to Wikimedia's community and getting a lot of feedback. If you throw something on the wall, people are going to say what they do and don't like about it. But it's hard to do that if you don't put anything on the wall. So, I think it's really important to not just to say, "This is a problem," but to say, "This is a problem, what do we do about it?" I feel incredibly beholden to this approach, especially if I'm publishing something publicly. Why not try to create solutions? Or, at least point people in the right direction, even if you don't know what a solution could be.

When you publish things publicly to get feedback, it's important to have a readership, and to have visibility. How did you go about gaining enough interest in your work to achieve visibility?

I actually used to run a blog that I took down at the end of ITP, called Cellar Paper. I was constantly writing there and photographing there. I was also commissioning stories from other friends. In 2012, I broke a story that Jessica Simpson was ripping off a pair of designer shoes for her own shoe label, and Jezebel picked it up, because I emailed it to them. I used to be really brave about emailing people.

I guess where my actual career publicly took off was after I published something about my experiences researching online harassment, and then ended up getting harassed myself. Gamer Gate actually sent a SWAT team to my mom's house. I wrote about this weird experience for Narratively, and Boing Boing reblogged it, or reblogged it, whatever they do. Then my first really great editor, Kashmir Hill from Fusion, started following me on Twitter. She sent me an email and was like, "I really liked your piece. If you have any ideas of stories you want to pitch, I would love for you to pitch them to us."

So your whole career trajectory sort of blossomed from there, whereas beforehand you were sending a lot of pitches out into the void?

Before that I wasn't really writing that type of research-based, investigatory piece. It didn't really dawn on me that that was something I could necessarily do. I had stopped blogging. I had also just graduated from school. This was at the height of Gamer Gate. I was working on a bunch of other related

research projects. It was really when I went to the Theorizing the Web conference to present my research, where someone from the Verge came up and asked if I would write a critical design review of Periscope. So I wrote an 800-word article on why it was a problem. Then another person who had come to Theorizing the Web asked me if they could quote me in a story they were doing about online harassment. So I think it was a nexus of me studying harassment, and having done this big project and presenting it at a conference. People just started coming up to me, saying, "You could publish this like this."

Do you think that having a niche expertise and wide mix of experience has helped you? A lot of people have an approach of, "I'm going to be a painter, I should do all these things that painters do," and they don't necessarily think about how that then puts them in a pool of very similar people.

Being very niche has been incredibly helpful for me, 100%. I remember talking to this professor about what I was doing early on, when I started my research. She was like, "I don't know many people thinking about this topic from a design perspective. That seems like a really good fit for you." Being a designer that's civically engaged is already somewhat niche, and then it's figuring out, what kind of designer are you? I already knew what kind of designer I was. I was a UX designer focused on research and infrastructure, and how people use tools. Then, picking the domain of online harassment and machine learning just sort of solidified it all.

At this point, do you have to actively seek out opportunities—or do opportunities just come to you because you're the most obvious subject expert?

It's a mix of both. With my current job, the position was created specifically for my research. Before I started my job, a reporter sent someone on my team a lot of my work, and was like, "If you're creating this anti-harassment team, you should just talk to this person." The people on my team looked over my work, then invited me to come in to have a conversation, and that turned into a series of interviews. Then, I pretty much made a case as to why they should hire an ethnographer design researcher over a data analyst.

So you proactively made the case for your own job—and it all worked out.

Yeah. And I still actively look for things. Not for employment opportunities, but for research opportunities. Research opportunities and conversations often lead to bigger conversations, which lead to bigger opportunities. So I'm always looking for people to talk to, and I'm always willing to have coffee, because you never know where that's going to lead. Oftentimes it leads to a very interesting idea that I'll dig into for a while.

You seem to really trust yourself to pursue a ton of different ideas and projects all at the same time. How do you carve out enough time to make it all happen?

I find it incredibly helpful to work with collaborators. Also, projects have to be lightweight and agile enough to stop and start at any time. A lot of it is just being a very clear communicator about expectations and about deliverables—about, "Where do we both feel blocked?" and "What are we actually working on?"

There is some work that I'm doing that I can do alone. I'm working on this piece right now called Feminist Data Set, where I run these three-day workshops with groups of people, and we try to define what feminism is. This project can be stopped and started at any time, and I don't necessarily need a lot of people to work on it. This could also be a four-year-long or a 20-year-long project.

When you work on these longer-term projects, how do you manage to sustain a feeling of urgency around them and not let them peter out?

I feel like I come at this from a different perspective. My coworker and I made a joke that if Silicon Valley startup tech's slogan is to move fast and break things, civic tech's slogan is move slowly and be nice to people. So much of my job is about moving really slowly and being nice to people because we have to get community feedback.

As an example, I'm really excited about this one public tool we're building that's in Alpha right now, that will compare two users to see if someone's being stalked. It's a tool that probably exists inside of Facebook, but it's something that they would never publicly release. It's taking us a long time because we've had to show every step of the process to our community. If we weren't doing that, we could have rolled it out in a week or two. But it also wouldn't fit our community's needs. So, for a lot of the work that I do, I've reevaluated what is "fast" and what is "slow." I think moving slower creates a stronger workflow because it lets you make things with people, rather than just give things to people.

How has studying user issues with social media affected your own use of social platforms?

I get really frustrated with it. I use Twitter a lot less now. There's a piece I've been wanting to work on called Microaggressions Inside Social Media. It's kind of the equivalent of, if you're hanging out with a bunch of people and you make a joke and nobody laughs, and then you wonder if everyone's mad at you. It's like, "Oh, if someone is not liking this because they don't see me, or is the algorithm messed up?" It's really strange to think about how social media can play upon your emotions and make you feel awful. And it's not a false notion of awful. If you feel something, then it's real.

But also, I get frustrated because there's no way for us as consumers to have equity in these systems. I

can't go to, say, the public people's forum of Twitter, and tell Twitter, "Hey, actually, what I really want is this thing." What we do at Wikimedia is we have the community technology wish list, so people can submit ideas of things that the Wikimedia Foundation should build for Wikipedia. We had over 200 ideas submitted, and over 1,000 people actively voted and participated. Then each idea got ranked, and the community technology team looked at what was actually feasible to build, and created timelines. Now, that's not a perfect system. But I think the idea that as a member of a community, you can have equity without having to work at that company is incredibly important. I wish that we had spaces like that for Facebook and Twitter.

How many people do you think you should talk to when you're trying to come up with the right tool for a community?

I mean, there are many possible answers here, right? You have to ask a lot of questions: What is the actual purpose of your tool? Is your tool supposed to be a solution for a small group of people, or for a general audience? Are you okay if the general audience is people that don't look like your friends? Do you care about equity in the system?

If you're like, "I don't care, I just want the tech running," then you should understand that not a lot of people are going to use your tool. It'll be really antagonistic to a general audience, and therefore it won't be a general audience tool. If you're really concerned about activists using it, then you should go to conferences like RightsCon to hear about how people working with activists and advocates outside of the United States are using technology. Then, you have to keep asking questions: Did you build this tool for the right platform, or did you just build it for iOS? Do you know people's cell phone usages outside of the United States?

Is there a specific method or resource that you recommend people use during the design process to get their thoughts in order?

Totally. I would create a series of user stories of how you ideally want people to use your thing. Then—and this is from a design class I took with Clay—articulate all the ways this could possibly go wrong. So if you're making a rideshare app, Clay's suggestion would be to ask, "What happens when someone takes the car across the border and lights it on fire? What are you going to do?" It's thinking about all the things that you intended to do, and then poking holes in how that could possibly go wrong.

Is there one piece of wisdom you could give people who are trying to build things for a wider community to use?

Take your time. Find people to talk to. Do user research. When I first started researching, the first thing I would do—and this is advice from Clay—is when you speak to one person, ask for a recommendation of three other people to talk to. I love that it's part of my job to just talk to people, for better or for worse. Even if it's a really hard or uncomfortable conversation, there is always a moment where I just can't believe that this is what I get to do with my life.

Five things Caroline has been revisiting over the past few months, for which the underlying topic is how research can culminate into different kinds of "things"—from VR pieces, to curated film series, to articles, to visual artwork:

NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism is one of my favorite VR projects right now. I love how Hyphen Labs is combining deep research, VR, and speculative design into their practice. This piece is one of my favorites because of how Hyphen Labs imagined these objects, then physically built them, and then integrated them into the VR piece.

Sara Watson's piece on metaphors of big data. It's a few years old but Sara is an amazing theorist and researcher on themes of big data and machine learning. This piece is one of my favorites to read when thinking about how misused metaphors muddy and change the way we relate to technology.

Generally, I'm incredibly obsessed with Heather Dewey Hagborg's work and practice. I love how she manifests such in-depth research—which deals with ethics, biology, and systems—into such well-articulated art objects.

For the past few years, I've been revisiting this series by the MoMA curator Paola Antonelli thinking about the lines of design, intention, and what constitutes violence.

Spectacle Theatre is one of my favorite places to go for visual inspiration. It's an amazing collective with a focus on art films, interesting work, and shows.

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