Stories and communities

Felipe Schmidt Fonseca - ESR4
D4.3 - Communication and Engagement Training

There are plenty of ways to approach Open Design. From sharing ideas and processes in the public to setting up structured co-design exercises, the universe of possibilities is pretty flexible and adaptable to the conditions and goals of each project. My work often adopts formats largely based on creating and maintaining community, usually making use of online communication. This text reflects on how that unfolds within my PhD research in the OpenDoTT project.

Instead of submitting to any objective predefinition of what a community is, I prefer to use it in a constructive manner. By that, I mean seeking to identify, and care for, commonalities. In other words, whatever aspects that a group of people have in common. It can be their geographical location, a set of interests, an opposition to something, a demographic characteristic, or even being affected by external events.

Whatever the shared characteristics, concerns or features, they are not in themselves enough to create a community. That requires an ongoing actualisation that happens typically through communication. It can be said, perhaps obviously, that there is no community without communication. Communication can serve different roles to a community - from forging identity to establishing boundaries and social dynamics. And it has different effects internally on the community than it does on external parties.

Internally, communication works to mediate - to offer means of interaction - between members of a community. Members typically perform different kinds of actions within the communities: triggering new conversations, moderating the collective discourse, engaging with ongoing interactions, organising and maintaining collective memory. As for what can be called the outside of a particular community, there are other functions to be carried out by communications: translating their interests and activities to the general public, gathering support, influencing external parties.

The boundary between internal and external communications is not always that well-defined. Community members may engage with either, depending on collective understanding and agreements. In both realms, nonetheless, storytelling is of chief importance in order for communities to thrive. Shared stories can create cohesion and support for a given worldview or a positioning regarding a particular question. They can also show newcomers how to navigate the often complex discursive reality of a group. Stories have always been essential to preserve collectively-built knowledge, not least in highly codified religious books, in oral tradition, in epic narratives and historic depictions.

When it comes to engaging exclusively with wider external audiences, however, it is important to be attentive to the type of media being used, what its characteristics are, and what interest the

public may have. Being a keynote speaker at a conference is totally different to being interviewed on live radio. The internal complexity of a community is in general not relevant to external parties, except when the intention is to prove diversity and participation. In other words, one community might use different aspects of its shared stories, or even different stories, to communicate with diverse media and audiences.

During the second year of work at the OpenDoTT project, I have experimented with community-building, by organising an online co-design lab called reuse.city happening. The lab had structured activities for a little over a month, with participants from various countries - people experienced with the reuse of materials in initiatives related to repair, upcycling, design, waste management and others. Most of them agreed to keep in touch moving forward, in what is gradually taking the shape of a distributed community of practice. The stories coming from this context might be expanded in the coming stages of my research - as well as to participants' own projects.