Proposal & Brief

The original Eco Babble proposal: A system that would gather data from a combination of web scraping and participant input to a central server. From there, it would be organised and processed for redistribution by a variety of public and domestic devices spread across the energy communities.

This was re-expressed as a brief that accrued amendments and alterations as it circulated amongst the team. Though it became messier in the process (we have actually cleaned up out-of-order and duplicate footnote numbering here) this didn’t matter while it served as a forum for a living conversation rather than a resolved or archival artefact.

considered ‘speculative design’. Finally, a key proposal resulted for an Energy Babble, and
Design an Energy-Babble system that displays material, collected from some combination of individual, community and public sources, to open and promote constructive affect and involvement in energy reduction issues and orientations. More specifically, the system should support understandings of, and practices related to, energy demand reduction.

1 Don't forget that energy reduction discourses might include those that are not part of the 'green' agenda, e.g. climate change deniers, travel writing, critiques of wind generation, advertisements for luxury goods, sports car adverts.
2 The intention is to contrast inconsistent or contradictory ways of talking about the environment (within as well as, and more importantly than, between pro- and anti-green agendas) to provoke uncertainty and reflection. Isn't it?
3 The intention is to draw on discourse as a means of mediating the environment. This includes different and contrasting ways of talking about the environment, not only to provoke uncertainty and reflection but also to render the actors and issues implicated in environmental 'babble' open to investigation, scrutiny, and reflection. The intention is also to go beyond mere discourse. Here, 'babble' also refers to a way of bringing into being new environmental actors through mistranslation and muddling-up.
4 I am assuming this will include distinct front and back-end considerations, which may be considered together or separately.
5 These could include domestic devices, mobile phones, ones designed for specific environments (the shower? the car?), as well as public displays, themselves potentially designed for specific places (public hall? library? notice board? parks?).
6 A system that will support different nodes and sites for interaction between communities and environmental babble.
7 Material might include text, images, sounds, videos, or God knows what.
8 Through people's purposeful input into the system, or web scraping, or bots, or...
9 Single source systems might also work, but seem less likely to create a Babble.
10 For me, of particular interest is the idea that users' responses to things they encounter on the system themselves become material for the Babble.
11 For instance by scraping websites, mission statements, blogs and taking some forms of community input into the system.
12 Policy docs, news reports, blog posts etc - but perhaps also by opening the system to input from individuals outside our core communities?
13 A more expanded notion of the public, or publics. One that includes different human environmental actors, such as community members, practitioners, policy representatives as well as non-human actors - such as bots etc.
14 My understanding is we're trying to unsettle people's understandings of the environment, potential problems concerning it and the right ways to address those problems. We may - or may not - benefit from considering what those understandings are, and the angles from which they might be challenged.
15 The intention is not only to unsettle people's understandings of the environment, it is also to... (something to do with the type of things or agencies that we recognize as being part of environmental issues.
16 By constructive we mean to refer to a 'constructivist' process where environmental objects and practices are reported on, created and given lives of their own within the system. This is in contrast to a 'critical' perspective.
17 Or not. Perhaps we just want our designs to act as 'the idiot', insisting that there is something else that matters, in a way that doesn't readily lead to coherent reflection.
18 Involvement would also entail communicational processes with other users of the prototype: involvement can therefore connote the contingent making of community/ies.
19 This footnote has intentionally been left blank.
20 Not just the way people talk but also the ways they act.
21 Presumably we would want multiple understandings but also practices leading to understanding through collective interactions? Also understanding feels a bit cognitive when perhaps we want a more general sense that opens up possibilities of understandings?
22 There is also much potential in stuff in the middle, e.g. automatic prompts for input (the Eliza system idea) and translators and filters for output.
23 Keep in mind production practicalities. We might want different physical devices housing the same basic infrastructure. Equally we might want identical devices with channels, or settings, or configurations that distinguish them.
24 A database driven system? Some sort of web interface?
25 Can the database itself become some form of environmental object?
26 Including those travelling between communities, i.e. the Songbird proposal.
27 Are there other ways to get 'community' inputs? Are there ways to reflect both the fact that we are working with self-identified communities' and Matthew's point, that communities are dynamic and emergent?
Why an ‘Energy Babble?’
Bill Gaver

The Energy Babble first appeared as a proposal labelled ‘eco-babble’ that was presented as a collage/diagram on a single sheet of A4.

When discussed at one of our design meetings, it quickly became accepted that this was what we would make. This is an experience we have had in numerous other projects, wherein what seems like a vague and confusing space of possibilities collapses into a more clearly focused sense of direction.

The Energy Babble idea ‘worked’, in part, because it brought together suggestions and explorations from other proposals. These ranged from the idea of whispering accounts of energy practices to the ‘energy shrines’ that would distribute them to other communities, to the idea of ‘preparedness advice for the end of oil blaring out’ of a device to be mounted near energy meters, to poetic treatments of nomad devices that would share stories. The Energy Babble consolidated these lines of thought in a proposal that suggested how they might be combined and achieved practically. In effect, it served as a hinge between our design explorations and more focused development work, providing initial guidance for this next phase of work.

But why were we drawn to the idea of an Energy Babble?

In part, it was because it built on expertise we had been developing over a number of projects that involved reframing content drawn from the internet – a strategy that we knew could yield rich results. Building an Energy Babble would mean dramatically expanding the number of sources we would draw on, as well as developing ways to communicate to a central server from devices – both challenges that would expand the Studio’s capabilities.

We also liked the way it combined ideas about letting communities report to each other about their practises with notions of providing new information about energy policy and technologies to the communities.

But perhaps most of all, the concept of an Energy Babble seemed to reflect the situations in which the energy communities found themselves. Getting to know them, we had become aware of the difficulties they had in dealing with complex and changing governmental policies, with rapidly developing technologies for saving and producing energy, with engaging members of their wider communities, and with communicating amongst themselves. Further, it was evident to us that they did not share the same understandings and assumptions about what they were doing. Some of the communities were concerned with energy reduction to prevent environmental catastrophe. Others wanted to achieve post-oil energy self-sufficiency. Others wanted to generate energy as a source of income. Each had its own understanding of motivations, issues and approaches, and this meant that, while it seemed from afar that they were working in congruent ways, in reality, they were all talking about slightly different things.

The Energy Babble seemed a satisfying response to the communities’ circumstances. It wasn’t really conceived as a source of new information to the communities or as a communication medium for them to share (though this later became the way it was often presented within those communities). Instead, it appealed as a kind of playful mirror to hold up to the communities, one that would reflect their complex and confusing situations, perhaps even in a humorous way.

That the Energy Babble was not conceived as a traditionally utilitarian tool did not mean that it was a critical or speculative design, however. While it embodies some rueful headshaking about the seeming impossibility of the communities’ pursuits, it wasn’t intended to mock them or to paint an overly critical or bleak picture. Instead, we meant for it to engage them in a kind of in-joke about the absurdities they faced, and ideally to prompt them to think about alternatives. We also anticipated that a Babble could be engaging and pleasurable in its own terms. From this point of view, the Energy Babble was intended to be as instrumental and functional as any traditional design, however untraditional its purposes may be.