Using

The idiosyncratic appearance and odd transmissions of the Babbles were often met with some puzzlement. During the deployment meetings, people interpreted the devices according to their own interests and desires, for instance seeing their potential use in publicity events or as a means to publicise their successes. In return, we found ourselves glossing the devices as providing a source of information to the communities, combined with a means of communication amongst them. Such a characterisation helped us reassure the communities about the Babbles, but when we returned months later it seemed that this might have confused peoples’ understanding of the devices.

Transcript of a 3-minute broadcast

CLIP 128

Duration 3.53 Minutes

JINGLE CEMBALO CHORD 1

Announcer: Allison (american english, female voice)
When I turn on the elections in the government

JINGLE KEYBOARD 1

Announcer: Ava (american english, female voice)
Recent message: Looking forward to febubabble

SOUND: RUMBLING NOISE

JINGLE KEYBOARD 2

Announcer: Kate (british english, female voice)
...saving lives sustainble transport

JINGLE PETER AND THE WOLF

ANNOUNCER: Oliver (british english, male voice)
Do you have a problem with coal?

JINGLE CEMBALO CHORD 1

Announcer: Allison (american english, female voice)
... Does anyone know power rating for the energy babble?

JINGLE GLOCKENSPIEL

Announcer: Jill (american english, female voice)
Omg something about imperialism and energy crises
Instead, snippets of news jostled against bits of nonsense, people’s contributions via the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>User</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>11:16:57.433000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi08 (?) High School has their own winter (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>11:20:41.177000</td>
<td>sms</td>
<td>Does your Wind turbine have a name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>13:23:08.556000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 Alex says enjoy your day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>17:27:16.794000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 This is ECDC 31, we are signing in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>17:28:54.323000</td>
<td>sms</td>
<td>Hello ECDC 31. We hear you loud and clear on our babble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>17:34:55.193000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 We live in less rooms now, because some have no insulation at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>17:36:15.657000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 The world has many floods but less talk of the climate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>17:37:02.043000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 More floods, less talk of the climate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>18:04:41.139000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 At home, that is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>18:05:01.434000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 In the weekend Twitter use goes down, heating use goes up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>18:11:48.366000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 How do we interact with this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-10</td>
<td>19:24:27.065000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 (?) doesn’t speak Dutch, it’s (flur’s?) birthday.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-12-11</td>
<td>08:31:55.815000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi14 The revision in government strike prices. Shows a lack of commitment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-12-11</td>
<td>08:59:03.547000</td>
<td>vox</td>
<td>pi25 (Paddles?) are expensive, if you rent your house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-11</td>
<td>10:21:14.001000</td>
<td>rel</td>
<td>I m in for the weekend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-11</td>
<td>14:16:55.396000</td>
<td>sms</td>
<td>More supernice in every event -- we should be proud and advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-11</td>
<td>15:21:35.358000</td>
<td>sms</td>
<td>Heating is always on in the flat beneath us. They are council tenants, i wonder if they have their heating bill paid for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-12-11</td>
<td>22:05:43.110000</td>
<td>sms</td>
<td>Hi Pete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Hi Pete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Log of contributions from users via microphone and SMS
Circulating 113

The microphone or SMS drifted from energy to food to random greetings, and the 'voice of the carbon emissions in the US raised two percent. Does one outweigh the other?

---

2013-12-13
54:36.785000
5:12-13
Lord morning, (say again), good morning. Good morning everybody.

---

2013-12-18
08:40:03.783000
RWE yesterday got consent for its 36 mega watt onshore wind project in brechfa forest, Carmarthenshire. This is adjacent to its larger 84 mega watt scheme in brechfa forest west. A great result for onshore wind in Wales.

---

2013-12-18
08:43:54.120000
(unclear) the proposed nuclear power station at (?).

---

2013-12-18
11:58:20.757000
Sidenergy has now been launched.

---

2013-12-19
12:51:21.604000
Merry christmas babble

---

2014-01-01
12:11:53.353000
Happy New Year.

---

2014-01-01
12:12:13.827000
They can sepak into the mic as well.

---

2014-01-01
12:13:34.247000
That was a question. Does babble answer questions.
Babble: - a locally sensible stream of consciousness generated by Markoff which chained
Design and Science & Technology Studies

Mike Michael

Introduction

In recent years, design has been particularly interested in one branch of social science, namely science and technology studies (STS). In some ways, this is not unexpected – after all, design, broadly put, has entered into a variety of technological and scientific endeavours (e.g. synthetic biology, industrial and product design, information technology, the built environment, vehicle design, etc.) and is thus ripe for STS analysis (e.g. Strengers 2013; Wilkie 2013). Design is thus another technical discipline that can be subjected to forms of STS analysis – analyses which ask, for instance, what assumptions go into the design of particular artefacts (sociological questions can also be posed in relation to the ways in which design is shaped by systems of production – e.g. Molotch 2003). Design also speaks to STS’s preoccupation with everyday technology and the ways in which this does, or does not ‘work’. Here, the longstanding STS interest in what counts as ‘working’ (ranging from successfully accomplishing local tasks to accidentally contributing to global climate change) maps onto design’s own interest in how to make stuff ‘work’. Thus, as writers such as Bijker (e.g. 1995) and Verbeek (e.g. 2005) have noted, design can help us understand how technologies can be built to incorporate new aesthetic, ethical, and political values.

In the first instance, design is a topic: it is simply one object amongst others that can be subjected to social scientific analysis. Here, the take-up of design as an empirical ‘object’ can be seen to correspond with recent ‘turns’ within STS, notably the turn to materiality (e.g. Marres and Lezaun 2011) and the turn to ontology (e.g. Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). In the second case, design is a resource – it can inform how social science goes about its business of analysing social processes. On this score, designers who provide alternative visions – of the world, of users, of how users serve in design procedures and practice – can serve as a means towards developing social critique.

If, however, we widen our scope and consider the relationship between design and social science more broadly, then what we see are much more intricate and intimate interdependencies that have played out in and over multiple genealogies. Such interrelations can be seen to inform, or at least provide a backdrop to, a fragmentary pattern of engagements between design and STS. This, for example, can be detected in the works of, for want of a better handle, ‘academic designers’. Social science and STS are unlikely to have been of direct and discrete interest to designers. At best, they will have been ‘addressed’ by designers only by virtue of being involved in such generic elements of academia as pedagogy (e.g. the classroom, virtual teaching) and publishing (text layout, online article processing) that have ostensibly been subject to considerable influence by various design disciplines – architectural, graphic, product, interaction, etc. While this all treats social science as a topic of sorts (a weakened form of interdisciplinarity), there are other genealogies where social science has resourced design thinking, or perhaps more accurately, where the boundaries between design and social science are not so easily demarcated. Here, for instance, we can take note of the work of Otto and Marie Neurath at the turn of the twentieth century (Cartwright et al. 2008). As a foundational blend of statistical and design reasoning, it observes how Scandinavian participatory design actively sought to achieve democracy in the workplace by way of Marx and Wittgenstein and echoes of action research, and points to the influence of Marxist and proto-environmental social scientific concerns in the classic work and critical design work of Papanek (1984). Moreover, it is not unreasonable to detect echoes of ‘action research’ in participatory design, the take-up of ethnomethodological approaches in human-computer interaction design (e.g. Suchman 1987), and, more recently, the trend for ethnographic data to resource designing, and even in so-called ‘speculative design’ (e.g. Gaver et al. 2008). And it is not difficult to point to the impact of various social science writers (e.g. Latour 2005; the Frankfurt School) in variants of critical design (Dunne and Raby 2001, 2013; DiSalvo 2012; Wilkie and Ward 2008). Here, then,
social science becomes a resource for design, impacting on the options – both conceptual and practical – that can become available to it.

However, against the idea of design as STS's topic or resource and vice versa, this essay counterposes the picture of design and STS as 'collaborators'. That is to say, we explore the interdisciplinary ways in which STS and design can work together, such as those mentioned above, such that together fashion new 'objects of understanding' (see Barry et al. 2008). So, in what follows, we discuss how design and STS can 'co-engag[e] with an empirical field'. However, design and STS are far too large as fields: we could not possibly do justice to them in so short an essay. Instead, we focus our efforts on those 'traditions' within design and STS which have entered into the project presented in this volume, namely, speculative design, and recent developments in 'actor–network theory' (or post-ANT). Nevertheless, a number of issues are raised, for what counts as 'engagement' and 'an empirical field' is not always shared.

In this essay, we look at several points of contact – ideally sites of mutual immersion – at which post-ANT and speculative design meet if they are to collaborate. These points are, in large part, pragmatically derived from the exigencies imposed by an institutionalised requirement to work together collaboratively. So, we can suggest points where negotiations and calibrations need to take place. Minimally, these might include: the crafting of 'the research question'; the choice of empirical sites; the empirical method/the process of field engagement; the analysis of data/the treatment of collected materials; and the presentation of data/materials and their analysis/treatment. However, this makes things sound a little too straightforward. This is because behind these points lie much bigger issues concerning, for instance: methodological questions about the means by which 'the empirical' is to be engaged (which methods do we use and is the social world described, intervened in, or enacted through such methods?); epistemologically, there are differences in how empirical material is treated (do we seek 'patterns in the data'; or generate idiosyncratic insights that draw on an unsystematic variety of sources?); and there are divergences in the political and ethical expectations that attach to the researcher (put crudely, is our role one of 'critique' of a definable state of affairs, or a provocation of possibilities within a world that is unfolding?). Having made these points, we should not forget that collaboration also arises through more personal and cultural dynamics – these are touched upon in the 'A prehistory' anecdote.

In light of this, in what follows below we will begin with an overview of some recent discussions of design research, paying particular attention to the character of speculative design. We will then consider some of the recent discussion in social science, especially those branches that are STS-inflected (post-ANT) and concern a view of method as performative, and a perspective on the world as heterogeneous, unfolding, processual, and relational. We will then bring these together to discuss some delicate points of intersection. We end by situating the present project in relation to these.

Design toward the speculative

'Speculative design' can be placed within a wider historical trajectory that arguably takes in such traditions as 'participatory design' (in which the process of designing objects or systems is directly shaped by the invited input of potential and future users so that the designs better serve users both practically and politically – see Ehn 2001) and 'critical design' (in which designers project sometimes believable, but often provocative, technological futures in order to design artefacts and/or systems which can serve to critique those futures by posing questions about what those futures suppress or assume – see Dunne 2005; Dunne and Raby 2001). In addition, it can be suggested that critical and speculative design can be related to architectural genealogies, notably experimental and radical architectural design exemplified by the work of Superstudio (see Lang and Menking 2003), Cedric Price, Constant Nieuwenhuys and Rem Koolhaas, amongst others. It goes without saying that the borders between these traditions are highly porous. For instance, a recent example of this porosity is the work of DiSalvo (2012) which develops an approach he calls 'adversarial design', which draws on and combines elements of both participatory and critical design. Latterly, practitioners of participatory design have proved adept at both incorporating the insights and problematique of elements of STS while also developing their own 'speculative sensibility' (e.g. Binder et al. 2011, 2015). And Dunne and Raby (2013) have, again recently, explicitly highlighted how 'the speculative' informs their own design practice as well as that of others. While the 'speculative design' that characterises the work of the Interaction Research Studio and its members (e.g. Boehner, Gaver, and Boucher 2012; Michael and Gaver 2009; Gaver et al. 2008; Wilkie, Michael, and Fernandez 2015) bears some resemblance to, and shares some common references with, participatory and critical design, it also displays some unique elements. Indeed, members of the Interaction Research Studio voice unease when it comes to characterising the work as 'speculative design'.

Having said this, a certain amount of care is required when it comes to demarcating what counts as speculative design, writing histories of design practice, or for that matter, delineating the interrelations between design and STS. Indeed, even what we describe as the 'Interaction Research Studio' comprises a shifting and evolving set of expertise and interests out of which the ECDC project emerged. Thus, the project team that comprised the ECDC project brought together interests in, and longstanding commitments to human–computer interaction design, product and industrial design, visual and graphic design, and STS.

purposely undermined its own utility, reflecting the coming together of a design practice
The ‘speculative design’ that has been developed by the Interaction Research Studio can be differentiated from other forms of design, including some to which the term ‘speculative’ is also attached, along a number of parameters. For instance, in relation to the role of the user in the design process, user input is both more and less ‘mediated’ than it is in more traditional forms of participatory design practice. While in the latter users engage in the evolution of prototypes by working directly with them, in speculative design potential users supply ‘material’ that feeds into the design process. This material can be ethnographic. This is relatively ‘unmediated’ insofar as the designers collect material through ethnographic visits to the domestic, work, or community settings of the potential users. This might involve informal conversations, non-participant observation, or the production of photographic records. At the same time, speculative designers also gather more ‘mediated’ material through the highly ‘artificial’ means of cultural probes (see below). As noted elsewhere in this volume, cultural probes are concerned with playfully encouraging participants to reimagine their relation to their social and practical settings (in order to tap into the ways in which such settings might unfold). Such probes vary in what they ask of their users (e.g. soliciting views on the aesthetics of a dwelling’s energy use, or providing the opportunity for idle doodling while talking on the phone, or enabling participants to take photographs of, say, a home’s spiritual centre), but they all aim to provide a sense of the ambiguous, immanent, tangential dimensions of aspects of participants’ lives.

Focusing on users also draws out further distinctions with speculative design exemplified in the work of Dunne and Raby. As mentioned, who ‘users’ or participants (to use the nomenclature of the Studio) are, and what they are capable of, emerges through the process of design, which often points to empirically near or ‘proximal’ futures. Here, however, the ‘users’ tend not be configured but rather remain as indistinct actors capable of ambiguity, irony, etc.

Having drawn these comparisons, as we shall see below, mediation and artificiality are highly problematic categories – however, for present purposes they serve to throw into relief the differences between participatory and speculative design. Another difference lies in how speculative and participatory design make use of their participants’ contributions. Participatory design makes direct use of such inputs – participants are thus quasi-collaborators in the design specification of artefacts and systems. For speculative design, the materials collected from participants again play a much more ‘mediated’ role in the design process. Specifically, these materials are set within a whole array of other sources, data, images, histories etc. They are combined – in an opportunistic and individuated way – with, for instance, fragments from design and art history, magazine articles, technical papers, official policy documents, collections of relevant technologies. These heterogeneous materials are also collected and *edited* in the form of workbooks which serve as common foci for developing design ideas (Gaver 2011). The intermediary result of this (part of) speculative design practice is a ‘brief’ in which the key parameters of the design are delimited.

There is a reverse comparison to be drawn between speculative and critical design. If speculative design tends towards relatively mediated engagements with participants (when contrasted with participatory design), there is nevertheless engagement per se (unlike much critical design). To be sure, both speculative and critical design enact a certain sort of ‘designerly mystique’ insofar as it is the designers themselves who ultimately develop the design (even if in the former case, participants have contributed). However, there is a key difference in the designerly ‘use’ of designs. For speculative design, the artefact and/or system must ‘work’ because they are deployed – sent out into the world to prompt yet more ambiguity and playfulness, and to further probe the not-yet that attaches to the specific social and practical worlds of users. This links to another round of material collection through ethnographic visits. For critical design, the ‘concept’ of – the idea behind – the critical design takes precedence over its actual functioning: insofar as it inspires critique of the related technological future, there is no special need for deployment, only access through exhibitions or published texts.

In this section, we have attempted to differentiate speculative design from two of its closest relatives – participatory and critical design. We have done this mainly by considering the different design practices that characterise each (e.g. the involvement of the user). However, there are also divergences around the ‘point’ of design. Design has traditionally been concerned with the future. However, how such a future is related to the present varies considerably across design genres. For straightforward product design, say, there is a proximal and linear relation between the present and the future: contemporary problems deserve near-future solutions and product design will provide those. Of course, things are more complicated: after all, this apparently linear movement entails projections of future and present users, contexts of use, shaping of futures and future users in the present in order to realise futures in which solutions are indeed solutions (as the sociology of expectations – a sub-branch of STS – makes clear – e.g. Brown and Michael 2003). For participatory design, the future and the present can be said to be intimately intertwined through the process of doing design. The participation of users not only shapes the product, but also models a more democratic design process, a model that ideally impacts on the politics by which problems are identified, solutions negotiated, and implementation accomplished (not least in the workplace). For critical design, as we have seen, credible technological futures are identified,
and then critiqued by virtue of a design that in some way or other demonstrates the ‘poverty’ of that future. If, broadly speaking, standard design designates a positive functional future, participatory design aspires towards a positive sociopolitical future, and critical design articulates negative sociopolitical futures, then speculative design orients towards an ‘open’ future. Put another way, if the standard design designates a positive functional future, then speculative design articulates negative sociopolitical futures, then speculative design orients towards an ‘open’ future. Put another way, the objects and systems developed through speculative design (and that includes cultural probes) serve as means to evoke a ‘proximal’ future – the complex, ambiguous, playful unfolding of the present in ways that are not always expected and which, potentially at least, open up the possibility of reformulating what is at stake in the situation into which the speculative design is introduced. We shall have much more to say about this in a later section when we discuss how speculative design and STS might interdigitate. Before that, however, we need to consider work in STS (and in social science) which resonates most closely with speculative design.

STS, ANT, post-ANT
Science and technology studies covers a multitude of approaches and issues, though the particular tradition we draw upon here is that of the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK). SSK has been particularly concerned to study how scientific knowledge is shaped by social practices, not least how putatively ‘objective’ knowledge about natural phenomena emerges through rhetorical and representational processes. At base, these processes involve scientists’ efforts to accredit themselves and their supporters, while discrediting their opponents (i.e. those who hold to different accounts of the natural phenomena under disputation). INTO this broadly social constructionist approach, actor–network theory (ANT) introduced a sense of materiality – the production of knowledge was shaped not only by the success with which scientists could recruit supporters to their epistemic cause, but also by the role of nonhumans. Thus, nonhumans such as microbes, electrons, wind patterns, and so on could all be treated as ‘actors’ (or ‘actants’) that might resist or assist in the establishment of accredited scientific knowledge. If scientists could ‘translate’ nonhumans and humans so that their roles aligned and their actions ‘converged’, they could build actor-networks in which all these human and nonhuman actors worked seamlessly together as one. This ‘ential’ role of nonhumans was extended to the production of social relations more generally. Thus, mundane technologies such as key weights and door closers, by affording or denying particular actions, were understood to be central to how people might associate with one another. Those who had a hand in designing such technologies could thereby impact on the sorts of associations possible amongst people, as well as between people and technologies (a small selection of classic references might include: Latour 1987, 2005; Callon 1986a, b; Law 1987).

To be sure, this is a very condensed overview of ANT (for an extended summary of this field, see Michael 2016), but hopefully it provides sufficient background to move on to more relevant post-ANT developments. ANT has been critiqued on several grounds, though in the present case we will mention just two of the most important for present purposes. Firstly, ANT has been too ‘managerialist’ or ‘militaristic’ – the picture of a central actor, such as a scientist or group of technologists, who ‘enrols’ or ‘mobilises’ others to form a network can do justice neither to the ways in which some actors are altogether marginalised, nor to the ways in which that central actor itself emerges out of complex sets of relations (that are not necessarily agonistic). Secondly, ANT is too ‘empiricist’: Latour’s (1987) methodological injunction to ‘follow the actor’ (e.g. scientist) cannot address the ways in which social research is instrumental in ‘making’ the object that it is studying.

Amongst the various arguments that fall under the (wide) rubric of post-ANT (e.g. Michael 2016), we can point to the following. Instead of the metaphor of network with its (ontological) evocation of agonism and linearity, various writers have turned to metaphors of assemblage, fluids, rhizome, and topology in which connections between actors are multiple, non-linear, and emergent. And in contrast to the empiricism of early ANT, writers are increasingly interested in the performativity of method – how we as researchers play a part in ‘enacting’ the phenomena which we aim to study (e.g. Law 2004; Mol 2002). We see both of these dimensions of post-ANT brought together in John Law (2004)’s reframing of social scientific method as a ‘method assemblage’. On the one hand, Law regards ‘reality’ in assemblage terms – a nexus of multiple, shifting, and emergent relations, a ‘world of becoming’ as Connolly (2010) frames it. As such, any particular entity arises out of a complex set of relations. At stake for the social scientific researcher is how to empirically grasp this shifting, emerging, processual array of multiple relations. The idea behind a ‘method assemblage’ recognises that when a researcher enters the research field (itself, of course, composed of flux, emergence, and multiplicity) she too takes part in the processuality of that reality. For Law to do research is to engage in active, uncertain, faltering ways with that reality while nevertheless simultaneously performing, enacting, or making that reality. This is because any such engagement is necessarily selective – only some elements of an assemblage are registered. As Law famously puts it, a method assemblage entails the ‘crafting of a bundle of ramifying relations that generates presence, manifest absence, and Otherness’ (Law 2004: 45). However, by taking this into account, the researcher can be more open to possibilities entailed in her ‘use’ of a method assemblage to the extent that she can ‘imagine more flexible boundaries, and different forms of presence and absence’ (ibid.: 85).

We can approach this way of thinking about method through the work of a post-ANT fellow traveller, namely Isabelle Stengers (e.g. 2005a, b). Drawing on the work of
Whitehead and Deleuze (who have both had some influence on ANT and its adaptations), Stengers focuses on the notion of event. Accordingly, events are, drawing on Whitehead (1929), ‘actual occasions’ in which a multitude of different sorts of entities (or prehensions) – entities that are, for instance, variously social or material, human or nonhuman, conscious or unconscious – collect themselves and combine (or concresce). In the version of the event we advocate here, we see these various elements or prehensions as mutually affecting one another, co-becoming as they concresce (see Fraser 2010).

Research events are, of course, a subset of events per se. As such, the process of researchers engaging empirically with the world not only affects that world, but conversely that world affects the researchers. In other words, both the ‘object’ of social research and the researchers themselves co-become – emerge together within the research event. One implication is that, given that the world and the researchers mutually change, it becomes problematic to continue to understand the event of their co-becoming as a ‘research event’. As Michael (2012a, b) has noted, the research event becomes along with the co-becoming of its component elements: it becomes something other, for instance, an exercise in irony on the part of research participants, or an occasion for tidying up the ‘mess’, as Law puts it, of the research event in order to sustain the political and institutional commitments of the researchers. More positively, we can also see the uncertain unfolding of the research event as an opportunity. Rather than trying to ‘solve’ the constitutive indeterminacy of the research event by, for instance, ignoring its less alluring or comprehensible aspects (especially when research participants ‘misbehave’ in one way or another), we can take these into account and see the research event as posing more intriguing research problems (e.g. Wilkie et al. 2015). This means, as Fraser (2010) puts it, asking better questions or engaging in ‘inventive problem-making’: this entails a reformulation of the issues at stake that underpin the research event. But further, because in the process of the research event the researcher has also changed, we might ask who or what is doing the research – and is it any longer research? This all reflects the open, unfolding, emergent, relational character of the event. Given this chronic uncertainty of the event, we are left with much more leeway in how we grasp – that is, enact or ‘make’ – the research event (which may no longer have much to do with the ‘research’ that we set out to conduct). Indeed, we can develop a more speculative approach to the ‘research event’. We can be more creative in how we enact a method assemblage in that we can explore how the ‘research event’ might unfold, and enquire into the various potentialities or virtualities latent in the event. In other words, following Isabelle Stengers (2010: 57), we can develop a method assemblage that ‘affirms the possible…. actively resists the plausible and the probable targeted by approaches that claim to be neutral’.

Post-ANT and speculative design
It should be clear that there are numerous resonances between post-ANT and speculative design as portrayed in the foregoings. Both are invested in a sense of the openness of events, and both adhere to a practice of enabling that openness to unfold (for an alternative, see Latour 2008). If post-ANT (inspired by various related writings) has evolved a conceptual vocabulary for addressing the methodological processes of engaging with the ‘possible’ of an event, speculative design has developed a series of techniques (such as cultural probes) which have practically enabled entrée into the ‘possible’. Needless to say, things are not so simple. As we have described anecdotally in this volume, post-ANT (or process-oriented social science) and speculative design (in the sense in which it is taken up in ECDC) have informed one another: in other words, in the extended event of their coming together, they have mutually changed. Thus, even within our own team, designers have become, albeit all too modestly, practised with using the concepts of post-ANT, and sociologists have become more comfortable with doing research through practice, through the process of practically working out how things might work (technically, materially, and aesthetically, as well as socially).

In this section, we discuss how the Energy Babble reflects the concrescence of post-ANT and speculative design. As a mixture or hybrid of the practical and the theoretical – a conceptual object and a material idea – it has been a key component in our method assemblage (which included site visits and probe exercises – see descriptions of what we did elsewhere in his volume). In particular, its specific design served to shape the possibilities that emerged in the research event of ECDC. These possibilities are at least twofold: they relate to what was emergent for the participants, but also what was emergent for us as researchers. The ambiguity and playfulness of the Energy Babble’s operation – the ways in which its broadcasts varied in their ‘sensibleness’ – kept the research event ‘open’ (though as we see elsewhere in this volume, there is also a temptation amongst some participants to ‘close down’ its meanings). How did all this happen?

From the perspective of speculative design, we might say that the slow and meticulous process of practically developing the Energy Babble installed a capacity for it to surprise both designers and users. This is in part because the Babble’s broadcasts do not make too much, or immediate, sense. The Babble thereby taps into the uncertain and emergent character of events (as understood in the present account). In the specific setting of energy communities and energy-demand reduction, the Babble potentially incites, not least in us as design researchers, ‘interesting problem-making’ around what counts as a community, what comprises information, and what can be understood by energy.

From the perspective of post-ANT, this practical ‘keeping open’ can be theorised through the figure of the ‘idiot’. According to Stengers (2005a), the idiot ‘resists the
consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilise thought or action’ (ibid.: 994). This is due to the proposition that the idiot does not make much sense when regarded in relation to the consensual or standard ways of framing an event. Because it resists easy comprehension, ‘the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don’t consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know’ (ibid.: 995). As social researchers, our job becomes one of ‘bestow(ing) efficacy upon the murmurings of the idiot, the “there is something more important” that is so easy to forget because it “cannot be taken into account”, because the idiot neither objects nor proposes anything that “counts”’ (ibid.: 1001). To be serious about the idiocy of the Babble is to be open about the openness of the research event of which it is a part – to use it for ‘interesting problem-making’ around what counts as a community, what comprises information, what can be understood by energy.

Concluding remarks
While we have, for ease of exposition, disaggregated the perspectives of speculative design and post-ANT in the foregoing, it should be apparent from the general discussion that things are far messier. There has been a mutual shaping – a co-becoming even – between speculative design and post-ANT in which each has assimilated elements of the other – respectively a certain vocabulary and a certain practical playfulness.

In terms of recent discussions about interdisciplinarity, we might say that the collaboration between speculative design and post-ANT has been ‘ontological’ (e.g. Barry et al. 2008; Born and Barry 2010) insofar as the concrescence of the various resources that each has brought into the research event has generated a new object of study – ‘the possible’ (of energy-demand reduction in the present case). However, this has not been without tension – tension that remains. Here, Stengers’ (2005b) notion of an ecology of practices proves useful. For all the mutual shaping, designers and social scientists are nevertheless still oriented towards divergent, as well as common, intellectual communities. Each has a particular understanding of what constitutes energy-demand reduction that is informed by the particularities of their home discipline. So, there is inherent in this process of collaboration a strain born of connections to specific disciplinary ways of doing and knowing. And yet, given that such collaboration is also an event of mutual change, it serves as an occasion for reconfiguring the disciplinary terrain – of, so to speak, opening up the possibilities of new ways of working together.

References


practices into disarray, to see what new questions and possibilities might emerge.


— Cosmopolitics I (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).


With 30 Energy Babbles on the loose, the month of February is all about turning on and joining in. Use your Babble to tell us what you are up to, how local projects are going, what's coming up and what has captured your attention in the news.

February will be a focus for our research activity, and with your contributions Babble will become a richer audio landscape.

If your Babble is still in a box, set it free and turn it on. If you would like to use Babble at an event, need help with wifi, or want to pass it to a friend, email info@ecdc.ac.uk or call 020 7078 5185.

Find out more at www.ecdc.ac.uk

Babble Gallery
Where does your Babble live? Send us a picture!

Jingle Jam
Compose a jingle to identify your community.

The revision in government strike prices. Shows a lack of commitment.

My mum says some of the flowers in her conservatory have flowered already.

Why do British Gas charge me 70 Pounds for electricity when I am in credit for 70 Pounds in my gas?

Reepham High School has its own wind turbine.

Hibernation is a cycle within a cycle. Like sleeping it gives us back our energy.

The inhabitants of Tiree are happy that the wind farm would not be built, it was only going to be about 2 kilometers from shore.

I heard that the oceans are dying, that whole regions are entirely dead. That really upset me.

Newsletters were sent to the communities during the deployment.
their interests, they might think about broadcasting the energy they’d generated or saved,

‘How does this improve the social operational well being of the people who use it? .... If I make an investment how do I get a payback?’

‘It’s a new type of thinking, you don’t know what you’ll get, it might just be chaos.’

‘That is a very powerful sales tool’

‘Devices for energy reduction are getting more and more complex and people’s understanding hasn’t. Some people cannot figure out a thermostat.’

‘If you put garbage in it, you will get garbage’

‘It’s amazing. I love it so much already. The messaging reminds me of the barbed wire telephone system in wild west. Seriously- google it.’
or using it to recruit new members, or improving their social relations, or even just
enjoying it for the unusual device it was. Meanwhile, they were going about their work
We picked up the last Energy Babble in deployment in July 2014, nine months after the trial had begun. The last device had been given to Jessica, one of our participants from Transition New Cross (TNX), a low-carbon community in South London. As in many of our deployment visits, we were welcomed with a cup of tea followed by a conversation about the experiences with Babble and a catch-up on the group’s activities.

From our initial contact to the deployment of the devices, our visits to the communities provided us with a glimpse into the struggles and achievements of each group. In our last meeting with Jessica, we asked about the recent activities of the TNX group. ‘Transition is a state of mind, it is more of an attitude,’ she explained while telling us that the group had not met in the last six months. This answer contrasted with our first encounter with the group.

We met the TNX group when we attended one of their regular meetings at the Green Shoots Community Garden. At that time, we were at the stage of recruiting communities to participate in the project, and we were interested in working with a group local to Goldsmiths University. Most the groups we had engaged with so far were communities that had received funding from the Low Carbon Community Challenge (LCCC), a DECC programme that provided funding for carbon reduction initiatives. While each group responded to different social contexts, this circumstance made them share particular characteristics: not only did these groups have the skills and human capital required to put together an application of that calibre, but they had also configured themselves into organised entities in order to be eligible for funding, from development trusts to registered energy service companies. In this context, TNX was a relatively emergent community.

At the time of our first meeting, TNX consisted of a group of local volunteers engaged in practices to reinvigorate the community and promote skills towards a sustainable future. The group had adopted the Transition model, a community model founded by Rob Hopkins in 2006 that provides guidelines for self-organisation towards resilience and reduction of carbon emissions. Mixed in age and backgrounds, the group was looking into initiatives that would allow them to establish themselves and expand their activities, which so far included organising film screenings, up-cycling workshops, and gardening training. The ECDC project was an interesting opportunity for them to interact with other groups and to explore different approaches to energy reduction.

Throughout the beginning of the ECDC project, TNX was an active and engaged participant. This was particularly evident at the initial workshop at the Geffrye Museum, an engagement event that brought together members of the different communities participating in the project. With seven representatives, TNX had a strong presence. Its members actively responded to Cultural Probes, and participated in discussions on the ECDC blog.

During the development of the Babble, contact with the communities became more sporadic. We would send occasional updates via a newsletter about our process to touch base. As the project developed, contact with TNX became less tangible. By the time of beginning the preparations for deployment, the website had been inactive for over a year, and emails to the official email address were not responded to. After chasing personal
contacts, we learned that the group’s communication platform had moved to Facebook. I posted an invitation to the deployment on their page and two of the members, Carlos and Jessica, decided to take part.

During visits, we learned that the group had not met as TNX for some time. One of the leaders of the group, who had driven most of the group’s activities, had moved out of the area. Even though many of the members of the group still met and took part in activities in the local community garden, the consolidation of the group in the Transition Town format appeared to have dissolved.

The length of the ECDC project gave us the opportunity to observe how each of the seven participating communities had evolved and responded to different challenges, from coping with policy changes to fully implementing new technologies. The case of Transition New Cross highlighted some of the struggles that communities can encounter. In the space of three years, the group had gone from being a collective effort to being an individual state of mind, detached from action.

This example illustrates how essential factors such as the cohesion and management of a group often rely on a few individuals, and it takes a change of circumstances to dissolve the bonding capital required to build a group. From a leader who moves address, to the lack of time for volunteering, the consolidation of a community of practice can be a precarious process. In this panorama, public funding can play a powerful role for communities to shape, as it can act as a catalyst to accelerate the process. But, equally, it can bring specific obligations and demands, configuring the communities in specific ways. The groups that are left outside the umbrella of policy remain susceptible to disintegration unless they can meet the right conditions.