Engaging the community

As we travelled the country to different communities, we heard a myriad of reactions from the community participants to the Babbles. For most of the people we talked to, the Babbles were unsettling, giving rise to ambivalence and confusion. The bricolage of text and music they offered was sometimes interesting, sometimes amusing, but rarely of real practical use. Nevertheless, the deliberation and care in the Babble’s design and the technical achievement in its production was evident. This was clearly no simple failure. The puzzle presented by the Babble, and the complicated ways it fitted and misfitted participants’ circumstances spurred long conversations. Soon after the field trial was over, we reported the Babble project to a preeminent conference in Human Computer Interaction (HCI). How to explain what we had found to an audience of computer, behavioural, and social scientists, with only a subset of members versed in design and the humanities? This extract from our paper simultaneously reports details of what our participants told us, and how we tried to explain this to ourselves and to our audience.

most admired the Babbles aesthetically, but not functionally. To explain this, they told

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items, ask questions and report energy use, all interspersed with occasional musical interludes and lapses into nonsense. The majority of content is related to energy and the environment and thus the devices present themselves as strongly focused on sustainability, though a fair amount of ‘off-topic’ content also creeps in from Twitter™, from following links, or from participant inputs. Our question was how our participants, all committed to environmental concerns themselves, would engage the Energy Babble.

**LIVING WITH THE ENERGY BABBLE**

We deployed a total of 21 Energy Babbles to members of the communities in a series of meetings at their locations (Figure 5). Each community received 3 or 4 devices, which were usually given to volunteers present at the meetings, though in a few cases extras were left for later distribution. The remaining 5 Babbles were distributed to team members, with 2 going to people more loosely connected to the project. Volunteers lived with the Babble for varying periods averaging about six months.

In the rest of this section, we briefly describe what our participants told us about their experiences with the Babbles. The majority of reports come from discussions when we deployed the devices, or several months later when we revisited the communities to pick up the devices. Others come from documentaries by an independent filmmaker hired to help us assess the field trial.

**Initial Expectations and Impressions**

We packaged the Energy Babbles, associated documents and equipment in custom-made cardboard boxes for transport. During deployment events, these were usually positioned visibly, but unopened, during an introductory presentation in which we reviewed the project. Then we would unpack a Babble device and describe how it worked. Because it took some time to set up one of the devices for demonstration, during these initial descriptions the group had not yet heard the system. Typically, then, initial comments and questions revealed a mix of assumptions, expectations and responses to the devices.

Initially, many participants expected us to produce a tool that would directly help them reduce energy consumption — or as G, from the Meadows, put it: ‘We thought we were going to get a gizmo to save energy’. When it became clear the Babble did not serve this purpose, they looked for other utilitarian pay-offs. In Hastings, for instance, an engineer asked ‘How does this improve the social operational wellbeing of the people who use it? If I make an investment how do I get a payoff?’ and explained ‘I wanted it to solve a problem’. These discussions tended to encourage the news/communication interpretation of the devices, which mollified many skeptics. For instance, the engineer realised the potential value in the Babbles as a kind of marketing tool for promoting their groups and environmental concerns more generally. The Hastings engineer, for instance, described broadcasting energy generation figures as ‘a very powerful sales tool’. In Sidmouth, the group speculated about deploying the Babble in a local energy shop, or using it as a recruitment platform at an Alternative Energy Vehicle show. In Reepham, the group decided that one of the devices should be free to roam, initially to the Post Office and later to a variety of environmental events.

Some people were happier to relinquish a utilitarian interpretation of the Babbles during the deployment events. For instance, after listening to the device during the Meadows deployment, D decided that they would name their Babble ‘Finnegan’, in a reference to James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. She explained that this was because the output is like ‘a stream of consciousness’. In New Cross, J sent an SMS message after her Babble started working: ‘It’s amazing! I love it so much already. The messaging system reminds me of the barbed wire telephone system in Wild West. Seriously - Google it. Thanks guys. :)’

**Installation and Accommodation**

Installing the Babbles involved configuring the devices to local router settings, dealing with security, and setting it up to communicate using the router’s wireless network. In many instances this proved unproblematic, but in some cases, including deployment events, it proved more difficult. While none of the problems we encountered were insurmountable, they seemed to demonstrate to potential volunteers the possible inconveniences of borrowing a Babble. More serious problems arose with some of the devices we left behind. For instance, in Reepham problems with a local firewall prevented the Babble from being installed in a local primary school. Other devices were borrowed but never installed, possibly because of the perceived difficulty of set-up. Pragmatic issues were salient even for imagined deployments: for instance, in Sidmouth ideas for showing the device at the Alternative Energy Vehicle show involved thinking about powering it via a car with solar panels, and achieving mobile internet access.

Building on this, in several of the groups volunteers saw potential value in the Babbles as a kind of marketing tool for promoting their groups and environmental concerns more generally. The Hastings engineer, for instance, described broadcasting energy generation figures as ‘a very powerful sales tool’. In Sidmouth, the group speculated about deploying the Babble in a local energy shop, or using it as a recruitment platform at an Alternative Energy Vehicle show. In Reepham, the group decided that one of the devices should be free to roam, initially to the Post Office and later to a variety of environmental events.

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Visual and Auditory Aesthetics
The Babble has an idiosyncratic aesthetic that extends from its physical design to its auditory output. Most of the volunteers found this appealing. For instance, in Ladox, J said she and her husband appreciated the Babble because it was ‘nice, funky looking thing’. In the Meadows, P, an art tutor, said it was a ‘really nice object’ and that the microphone was a ‘lovely visual element’. This appreciation was mixed with some bemusement, however. Several people remarked on it having a ‘retro’ appearance, or as J from New Cross put it, the Babble looked ‘like my gran could have had one’. It also was compared to kitchen appliances. For instance G from Ladox, told us ‘it looked like a food processor… a bit quirky’, while G in the Meadows told us that visitors to his home usually asked jokingly why he had a blender in his living room. The glass elements, too, attracted a mixed reception: R from Reepham described the Babble as ‘beautifully made in hand blown glass’, but its fragility was a worry for the librarian of a secondary school where it was installed.

Despite some initial concerns, we received no complaints about the synthesised voices used by the Babble, and several people remarked favourably about their clarity. On the other hand, the fact of it being an audio device could be disruptive. G, in Ladox, told us he had moved it from the kitchen to the living room because it was a ‘disruptive. G, in Ladox, told us he had moved it from the kitchen to the living room because it was a ‘disruptive’. J in the Meadows told us that visitors to his home usually asked jokingly why he had a blender in his living room. The glass elements, too, attracted a mixed reception: R from Reepham described the Babble as ‘beautifully made in hand blown glass’, but its fragility was a worry for the librarian of a secondary school where it was installed.

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The intermittent nature of the output could also be unsettling. ‘A few times it frightened the living crap out of me’, J in the Meadows told us. She elaborated that once when the office was completely silent at around 9pm, the Babble had given her a fright when it unexpectedly came on. She also complained that it ‘didn’t talk on cue’ when she showed it to visitors, and (like other volunteers) would have liked to be able to replay interesting outputs.

Babble as a Source of Information
Volunteers often oriented to the Babbles as a potential source of information. This is not surprising given that the audio was designed in the style of an automated news broadcast, that many of the volunteers showed a propensity to seek utilitarian explanations for the device, and that we tended to encourage these explanations to reassure them to seek utilitarian explanations for the device, and that we tended to encourage these explanations to reassure them.

By the end of the field trial, however, many volunteers expressed disappointment in the Babble as a source of environmental news. In Ladox, G told us that he did hear information ‘which was interesting’, but explained that he did not follow many alternative sources of environmental news. In contrast, his colleague J told us that she welcomed the Babble as a source of new information, but ‘disappointingly, not as much as I hoped’. ‘It seemed a bit sparse,’ she explained, and ‘very repetitious’. In Reepham, R subscribes to DEC emails that he looks at in the morning: ‘if they’re about something I’m interested in I read them’. He told us that the Babble never provided relevant information of which he hadn’t been aware.

A recurring theme in discussing the Babble was that too much of its output was irrelevant. J, in Ladox, for instance complained that there was ‘a lot more of the jumbly stuff and less of the straight stuff’. ‘I tend to be on the serious side’, she explained, and ‘definitely the balance was wrong’. Considerations such as these led to suggestions for filtering the output. For instance, R in Reepham speculated that the Babble could be more like a radio: ‘you might have one stream about transport, another about food, about heating the home…’, describing the result as ‘far more relevant’. To our suggestion that mixing streams might support serendipitous connections he was doubtful: ‘people’s attention spans are getting shorter’, he explained, so they would get bored before putting things together themselves.

J, in the Meadows, also said that the Babble gathered too much irrelevant information and that it needed a ‘filter’ to focus on reporting news about communities and government, ‘rather than oil and gas’. G, also from the Meadows, echoed this, suggesting the Babble could be an app with buttons to switch on and off channels of information—a ‘filtering mechanism’.

There was no clear consensus across volunteers about which streams of information were worth hearing, suggesting that the ability to select among them would lead to a more utilitarian design. In the Meadows, for instance, P found the energy reports frustrating as they didn’t mean anything to him, while G, interviewed separately, said they were ‘really really good’. In New Cross, P reported that she couldn’t follow the ‘technical information’, referring both to the energy reports and the information on renewable systems. For her, ‘you can connect more to personal comments, to the emotional side of energy’.

Babble as a Medium for Communication
Volunteers had mixed reaction to the ability to input and hear comments using the Babble’s microphone and SMS facilities, and this was reflected in the relatively few messages they left on the system (about 35 over 5 months). There was an evident reluctance to enter messages. During the first weeks of living with Babble, for instance, J in New Cross made a few contributions using the microphone. Eventually her reaction became more of an ‘internal conversation’. She reported that when she reached for the microphone she felt nervous about saying something important to the system. Similarly, R from Reepham told us that he didn’t input much because he has ‘controversial views’ and didn’t want to ‘upset anyone’. He recounted how he had heard something on the Babble that he disagreed with, but refrained from expressing his views because he considers them quite controversial. ‘I was aware that DECC might be listening, I want to come across as quite conservative, you don’t know who is listening’. In the Meadows, G was concerned to prevent his
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dughter from saying silly things into the microphone
(when asked what those might be he responded ‘are there any fit hotties out there?’). Nonetheless, many comments diverged from clear relevance for environmental concerns, and G was annoyed by messages he thought trivial.

The reluctance to contribute to the system ran counter to appreciation for the content that did appear. For example, J from the Meadows said she would have liked to hear more from the other communities, especially ‘stories and tips on how they’re dealing with these issues’. In New Cross, J enjoyed the comments: ‘you can connect more to personal comments, to the emotional side of energy’. Conversely, G in the Meadows would have liked to read out his household energy use, while P would have liked to broadcast his solar energy production; however there was little reflection about who the audience for these figures might be.

Finally, we had some indications that the lack of user inputs into the Babble reflected a lack of interest in communicating with other groups more generally. R, in Reepham, was clearest about this: he told us that while he occasionally kept track of what other communities are doing, differing circumstances meant that ‘what might not be right for them, might be right for us’. He might check for good ideas but unless something was ‘revolutionary’ there wasn’t much use in this. Equally, he liked telling people what worked in Reepham, but described this as ‘reactive not proactive’—his group doesn’t proselytise ‘the way Transition Towns do’.

Appreciation for the Babble
Despite the lack of clear success for the Babble as a utilitarian information or communications product, all the volunteers we spoke with were largely positive about it. In part this reflected appreciation for it as a well-finished, device that could fit the home (Figure 6). In part, it stemmed from admiration for the Babble as a novel technical device. In Reepham, for instance, R found ‘stimulating’ the way it uses audio rather than visual/text as a way of encountering social media. In the Meadows, P speculated about extending the Babble’s technology, for instance to automatically tweet about his solar panels, or to nag him about his bad energy habits.

Admiration for the Babble as a novel technical and aesthetic device blended with its value as something to show to other people. C from Hastings, for example, was effusive about the Babble, describing the novelty of the device and the attention it had garnered at work, where she originally installed the device, and at home, where she took it later. R from Reepham described it as ‘a curiosity for visitors’ that he enjoyed to members of a number of other environmental organisations with whom he worked.

Finally, several volunteers expressed appreciation for the Babble as a source of ambient awareness of environmental action. In New Cross, J told us it was reassuring to hear evidence of expertise: ‘Thank God for people who know the technical bits, it’s strengthening to hear that there are people out there in charge’, and more generally that the Babble gave her a sense of a larger community concerned with environmental issues: ‘it makes you think that you are not alone in thinking about saving the world’. In the Meadows, J expressed a more abiding affection for the presence of the Babble: ‘aw, I’ll miss him actually. It was nice to have him on in the background, I’m used to it now. Its quite aptly named, Babble’.

Babble and Wider Conversations
The accounts above all reflect discussions centred fairly closely on the Babble system as a product. What became striking to us, however, was the way that our conversations with the volunteers frequently opened from an initial concern with the Babble’s usability, functionality and aesthetics to encompass the broader and more particular issues, practices and controversies with which our volunteers were living. Though these discussions may be of questionable relevance for assessing the Babble as a product, we suggest that these conversations and the insights they revealed can be viewed as an outcome of the Babble as a research tool.

For instance, at the Meadows, during a suggestion that the Babble content should be filtered to focus on communities and government ‘rather than oil and gas’, J suddenly exclaimed ‘except that British Gas are bastards!’, and conversation with her diverged into lengthy complaints about DECC’s lack of support, British Gas call centres, and pigeon droppings building up under solar panels. In Ladock, our conversation with J about the Babble soon expanded to include her complaints about the hurdles involved in securing government funding for environmental work (‘we think they’re rubbish’), and the frustrations of not being able to give away radiator backdrops, energy monitors and LED down lighters at an Energy Fair she organized (‘it was a total failure’ that ‘didn’t engage the people we set out to engage’).

Also in Ladock, G described their attempts to put up a new wind turbine that was rejected by the council ‘on spurious grounds’. He attributed this to ‘about half a dozen residents who spread a lot of misinformation’ about how the Low Carbon Living group were out to ‘line their own pockets’, culminating in ‘a minor punch-up’. Like J, he expressed
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frustration at the difficulty in reaching out to dissenters within the community (there’s ‘no forum to talk to those people’), and also with the government: ‘lots of businesses are starting up then going to the wall because the government keeps changing the rules’. These complaints were mixed with pride in the group’s achievements. For instance, he referred to a ‘story’ he put on the Babble about how on a sunny day he used his PV to charge his car and heat water: people were impressed that he could ‘drive 75 miles and have hot water for absolutely nothing’. He concluded that ‘you can’t depend on the government to do things, you can depend on the community to do things’.

A notable theme that emerged from several volunteers had to do with the entanglement of energy concerns with other issues. For instance, R in Reepham told us he would be going to Buckingham Palace to be honoured for his contributions to energy efficiency, but said that he’d like to be recognised for the work he does that goes beyond that. The Babble should go beyond energy, he told us, to address fuel poverty, transport poverty, and take a ‘holistic’ view. ‘Energy is a key part of it but the stories are about many other things’ he said, ‘It’s too sterile if you look at only energy’.

Similarly, in Ladock J told us that her husband refuses to be involved with Low Carbon Living because he sees their efforts as futile. ‘We should be lobbying’ she said, and mentioned the social networking activist groups Avaaz and 38Degrees as effective (‘though I understand their limits’). She also does work with Christian Aid. ‘You tend to see how it all fits together - the international aspects of climate change’. For instance, when Christian Aid pointed out that climate change harms the poorest first, she thought they were off-topic, but then realised it was true. This led her to realise that ‘we treat the world and how we treat other people, they’re all linked’.

DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING THE BABBLE

Taking seriously the idea that the Babble played an important role in sparking the intense discussions we had with our volunteers suggests that we move beyond assessing the system according to the utilitarian characterisation of it as an information and communication product. Turning to the reflective interpretation of the Babble instead, as a system that gathers and ‘intensifies’ conversations leading to better understandings of the communities and their concerns.

A simple version of this account would suggest that the Babble should be understood as a research tool that was successful, rather than simply as a utilitarian information/communication product that was less so. The distinction between these roles is not clear-cut, however. The Babble was never seen purely as a prototype product, either by the volunteers or ourselves: we never planned to produce it commercially, and they were always aware of it as part of a research project. The Babble was never solely a research tool either: it was offered seriously for long-term use, and participants engaged with it not only to further their discussion with us but to engage with the material it offered in its own right. The product and research-tool faces of the Babble are interdependent. Here we discuss several conceptual handles on how this might be understood.

To start with, it is helpful to consider the Babble in terms of the conceptual character of the ‘idiot’, who, in Stengers’ [13] account:

resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action. This is not because the presentation would be false or because emergencies are believed to be lies, but because "there is something more important". Don’t ask him why, the idiot will neither reply nor discuss the issue,... the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don’t consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know (p. 994)

From this point of view, the Babble can be seen to act as an idiot within the energy communities who used it (see [17] and Michael [9]), by confounding expectations of how technologies should contribute to the communities’ work. This was evident both during the deployments, when the Babble surprised and confused volunteers who were expecting some sort of demand reduction meter, or at least a clearly utilitarian design (‘I wanted to solve a problem’), and throughout the project, as volunteers struggled to make sense of what it was doing. Instead of acquiescing to ‘the consensual way in which the situation is presented’, the Babble implicitly suggested that in the confused flow of messages about energy use, policy shifts, new technologies, and seeming irrelevances “there is something more important”.

But what is that ‘something that is more important’? The Babble never says, but gives its output this might include keeping in touch with emerging policy, sharing best practice, being aware of energy sources and demand, and joining with other communities—the very concerns identified as important by the funding programme that supported the project. But the Babble does this in the most literal, even stupid, way, and the volunteers resist it. They counter by insisting that policies are ever-changing and wilfully made difficult, that what works for one community may not work for another, that it is difficult to find meaning in statistics about energy, and that there is limited value in further contact with other communities. From this point of view, the roles are reversed: it is the Babble that presents the ‘consensual way in which the situation is presented’, and the community volunteers who are cast as idiots, asking the Babble, and us, and the policy-makers, to slow down, because we do not ‘possess the meaning of what we know’.
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Our conversations with them at the end of the field trial, then, can be seen as reflecting their pent-up responses to the obduracy of the Babble. Yes, the Babble may be right in saying that there are larger concerns at play than can be addressed by energy demand meters, but what is needed is not simply more policy, more news, and more communications. On the contrary, they told us, we need better filtering, better ways to talk about energy, better situated ways to communicate, and recognition that energy use is situated in a wider landscape of local and global issues such as inequality and sustainability. And through this, they revealed their realities, helping us to understand that these ‘communities’ are shifting collections of people who constantly reconfigure themselves, and who do extraordinary work to negotiate changing policy opportunities and obstacles, to filter information about new technologies, to reach out within their own communities, and to understand when it is worth communicating more closely with others.

In the end, the Babble might be understood in terms of DiSalvo’s [4] account of how design can play a part in constructing publics. Following Dewey, DiSalvo suggests that publics form around issues, and that design can participate in this by bringing issues to prominence. He suggests two primary tactics for this: projection, in which designs suggest possible future manifestations of current trends, and tracing, in which design is used to make clear the history of current situations. To this, the Babble might add a third tactic: concentration, in which current accounts and discourses about an issue—in this case energy—are brought together to form, not just a neutral representation, but a focused stream that inundates listeners with the many informed and frustrated. Moreover, the discussions variously in competition and united, begins to point toward a public that emerges out of an incoherence of the babble itself. Thus the Babble may also help (re)configure a public of HCI researchers, funders and policy makers to concern itself with these realities of energy communities rather than, simply, technologies focused directly on energy demand reduction.

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