"I Don't Need a Megaphone to Be Helpful": Probing the Role of Technology in Pro-Choice Abortion Activism

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ABSTRACT

The legality of abortion in the United States of America is rapidly shifting, creating a nebulous, challenging context for pro-choice abortion activists. In this in-progress work, we align ourselves with pro-choice activism as "academic accomplices" and investigate the technological habits and needs of pro-choice activists in the conservative US state of Indiana. To date, we have conducted 14 design interviews with potential / current pro-choice activists in Bloomington, Indiana, and have designed a cultural probe to examine the role of technology in pro-choice activism. We aim to understand the challenges of pro-choice activism and opportunities for supportive technology.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Computer supported cooperative work**.

1 INTRODUCTION

Abortion is a fundamental component of modern healthcare. However, in the United States of America, abortion is a highly divisive and legally complex issue. In 2022, US federal protections for abortion (Roe v. Wade) were repealed [20]; subsequently, US states began

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individually regulating the legality of abortion within their borders. This created a novel, complex context for US residents seeking an abortion or supporting abortion access, as the legality of abortion rapidly changed across fifty separate US states.

The US state of Indiana is an example of an emerging, particularly complex political and health context. Following the 2022 repeal of federal abortion protections, Indiana issued a near-total ban on abortion [13]. That legislation was then halted via preliminary injunction; as of writing, the case is before the Indiana State Supreme Court. In response, pro-choice (i.e., in favor of increased access to abortion) Indiana abortion seekers and supporters have engaged in activist work, urging Indiana lawmakers to repeal the abortion ban. This activism is an important method of civic engagement and healthcare advocacy; but, the nebulous, volatile political health context poses a barrier to activists finding appropriate resources and connecting with one another.

Technology has the potential to reduce this barrier. But, relatively little is known about the challenges faced or technology used by pro-choice activists in Indiana. Understanding these challenges and usages can allow researchers and designers to better support pro-choice activism in emerging political health contexts like Indiana. To this end, we align ourselves with the pro-choice movement and are investigating how technology can support these Indiana activists. In this paper, we report on the participatory design of a cultural probe exploring the technological needs of pro-choice abortion activists in Bloomington, Indiana, a small town with approximately 80,000 residents. Building on existing HCI work supporting activism [2, 7, 8, 12, 16, 21], we aim to contribute to an empirical understanding of the challenges faced by pro-choice abortion activists and opportunities for supportive technology in the United States' emerging political health context.

2 BACKGROUND

We base our research on prior work which examines the roles of HCI practitioners and technology in social activism and civic participation, particularly in the context of women's and reproductive health.

2.1 Technology and HCI Practitioners Within Activist Movements

In this research, we respond to the growing calls for HCI practitioners to align themselves with social activist objectives. Scholarship and activism can have a mutually beneficial relationship [19]. This is particularly relevant to HCI, a field with a rich history of engaging with public services and civic engagement through 'design for democracy' [4–6, 16, 17]. The HCI and CSCW communities are both capable of and, in many aspects, already actively engaged in applying technology to activist contexts. Past work has shown that technology can express 'matters of concern', i.e., pertinent social issues, [8] by facilitating collective understanding of experiences [7], supporting community activists' information practices [3], and encouraging civic engagement [21].

Within these intervening and facilitating technologies, HCI practitioners can and should engage with social activism as an opinionated, non-"objective" contributor–the practitioner's positionality has a significant impact on activist project outcomes, and should be actively considered, stated, and revisited throughout a project [2, 9–11]. Specifically, several scholars have adopted the term "academic accomplice" to describe their role as scholarly supporters of community collaborators working towards activist goals [2, 11]. In this paradigm, the subjectivity of the HCI practitioner is embraced and accounted for, rather than ignored for the sake of traditional objectivity.

In our research, we build on this prior work by recognizing the capability of HCI work to support activism, and embracing the role of "academic accomplices". We see our in-progress work as investigating how technology can, as it has in other contexts, express 'matters of concern' in the emerging political health context of Indiana, USA.

2.2 HCI, Health, and "Social Activism"

We build upon a growing body of work at the intersection of HCI, health, and social activism. Importantly, past work does not necessarily use the term "social activism" to describe this intersection. Other terms include health activism [14], activism for social change [18], advocacy [16], social justice [15], collective responsibility and civic engagement [12], or simply broad engagement [1]. Thus, when we refer to "social activism", we refer to a definition that encompasses all of these terms: the general public's engagement with controversial, often stigmatized, issues and support of societal change which alleviates these issues.

In health broadly, this past work suggests that technology can help communities pursue social change [18] and challenge social norms related to health conditions [14]. In women's health specifically, this past work further indicates that technology can successfully support activism for health challenges unique to women. Activism research in women's health offers unique challenges, such as researcher hesitancy to engage with intimate care [1] or gendered social dynamics [15]. However, these challenges can be navigated to achieve a positive impact, such as supporting reproductive rights activism through digital storytelling [16] or building collective responsibility for menstrual health resources [12].

In our current research, we expand this prior work by examining social activism for women's health in an emerging political

health context: the United States after the repeal of Roe v. Wade. In particular, seeing how digital storytelling can engage pro-choice stakeholders [16], we adopt this design emphasis in our cultural probe.

3 METHODS

To investigate opportunities for HCI practitioners to support pro-choice activists in this novel legal context, we designed and are in the process of deploying a cultural probe. Herein, we will present the completed segment of our study, the design of the probe.

To design our probe, we conducted an interview study with 14 participants (refer to Table 1). This study was approved by our university's institutional review board. Our eligibility criteria were: residence in the town of Bloomington, Indiana, and interest in participation in / current participation in pro-choice abortion activism. We recruited these participants through physical and virtual flyers. All interviews were conducted virtually and were compensated with a $15 USD Amazon gift card. In keeping with our role as "academic accomplices" [2, 11], we self-disclosed our pro-choice stance to participants at the beginning of interviews. Interviews were analyzed via affinity mapping.

We conducted three rounds of interviews to inform the design of the cultural probe. In the first round, we investigated six participants' experiences supporting abortion in Bloomington, and their corresponding technology usage. In the second round, we investigated six participants' thoughts on two probe concepts we had designed to support pro-choice activists, based on our first round findings. And in the third round, we investigated four participants' thoughts on and usage of our high-fidelity probe prototype, designed based on our first and second round findings.

4 DESIGN INTERVIEWS

4.1 Activists' Experiences (Round 1)

In our first round of design interviews, we found that participants had diverse engagements with activism. Common engagements were donating to local abortion clinics/funds (P1, P2, P8), attending protests/marches, and raising awareness via social media (P2, P4); less common engagements were writing letters to local legislators (P8), attaching pro-choice stickers to public buildings (P2), and supporting patients as a healthcare professional (P5).

A lack of community support was a barrier to engaging in pro-choice activism shared by all participants. They were either only supported by family/close friends (P3, P4, P5), relied on solely online groups due to fear and workplace culture (P1, P2), or struggled to maintain any connection to the broader Bloomington community (P1). This lack of support cascaded into other barriers, such as fear of consequences for speaking out (P4, P5) or insufficient available time to research and/or participate in potential activist activities (P2, P4, P8). Because this need for community support was shared by all six participants, we felt it would be a fruitful focus for our probe. After design iterations, we selected two concepts designed to address the lack of community support: a digital bulletin board for activist communities (Figure 1a), and a personality quiz which matched users with a pro-choice "activism style" (Figure 1b).

Table 1: Interview participant demographic and activist information

ID	Age	Gender	Round	Activism Involvement	Activism Activities
1	52	Female	1	Somewhat involved	Donating, protesting
2	41	Female	1	Actively involved	Donating, stickering, posting on social media
3	26	Non-Binary	1	Somewhat involved	Being available, protesting
4	30	Female	1	Not involved	Protesting, debating on social media
5	38	Female	1	Somewhat involved	Supporting via profession
6	35	Female	2	Not involved	None
8	23	Female	1, 3	Somewhat involved	Donating, letter writing
9	41	Male	2	Actively involved	Donating, supporting via profession
10	21	Male	2	Actively involved	Protesting, providing security
11	32	Female	2	Not involved	Donating, providing emotional support
12	53	Female	2	Not involved	Donating, posting on social media
13	19	Female	2, 3	Actively involved	Organizing events, providing emotional support
15	61	Female	3	Somewhat involved	Protesting
16	19	Female	3	Somewhat involved	Protesting, working for pro-choice organization

4.2 Concept Exploration (Round 2)

We used the two design concepts to explore participant preference in our second round of design interviews. We found that participants universally preferred the personality quiz concept . Participants described the quiz as more familiar, accessible, and engaging. For instance, P6 described the board as "*useful,*" but the quiz as "*empowering*" and "*exciting.*" P10 thought the board was "*good for info,*" but felt the quiz "*pull[ed] you in right off the bat.*" Furthermore, participants felt the quiz concept encouraged independent exploration and self-discovery of activist identities. For example, Participant 6 felt the quiz concept validated her identity as an introverted pro-choice activist, remarking that *"I don't need to be out with a megaphone... to be helpful"*. Due to this strong participant preference, we selected the quiz concept for our probe.

4.3 Prototype Feedback (Round 3)

For our third of design interviews, we used feedback from Round 2 to create an interactive prototype of our pro-choice "activism style" quiz. The prototype included an activism questionnaire, five unique activism styles, a 'Community Map' of anonymized activist stories, and recommended activism activities for each style. Four participants engaged with the prototype in a series of structured tasks. Their feedback centered on three themes:

- **Information Connectivity.** Participants wanted connectivity between the probe's different elements, such as *"more in-depth results"* for activism style matches that paired with the Community Map's anonymized activist stories (P8, P13, P15).
- **Action-Oriented Recommendations.** Of the prototype's activism recommendations, those with more specificity resonated more strongly with participants. They expressed a desire for *"action-oriented"* recommendations that would show them the "next steps" *after discovering their activism style (P8,* P13, P16).
- **Questionnaire Wording.** Participants felt the questionnaire wording was confusing, and that terms like *"resources"* (P8, P16), *"complicated"* (P8, P15), *"behind the scenes"* (P8),

and *"publicly"* (P15) were open to disparate personal interpretations.

5 PROBE DESIGN

Our probe's final design is *Activism Styles*[1] (Figure 2), a Flask-based, cross-platform website[2] which matches pro-choice activists with a pro-choice "activism style". Informed by our design interviews with 14 Indiana, pro-choice, potential / current activists, our probe has two core features: "activism styles", recommendations, and stories; and a questionnaire and matching algorithm.

5.1 Activism "Styles", Recommendations, and Stories

The *Activism Styles* probe shows users five distinct pro-choice activism "styles": the Educator, Empath, Organizer, Philanthropist, and Protestor. Each of these styles has unique characteristics, recommendations for participating in activism as that style, and community stories. Users can explore these styles independently, or through taking a quiz and being matched with a style–in the latter case, users are given a match percentage for each style and can continue to explore all styles.

We based these styles, recommendations, and stories on our design interviews. The styles themselves are, in essence, UX personas which we developed through our 16 interviews. The recommendations are based on what interviewees described as most helpful, and the community stories (inspired by Michie et al. [16]) are based on participants' anonymized experiences as activists. The ability to independently explore or be matched with a style was derived from Concept Exploration feedback.

5.2 Questionnaire and Matching Algorithm

To match users to one of the probe's five pro-choice activism "styles", we created a questionnaire on user's pro-choice activism preferences and an accompanying matching algorithm. Both of these

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[1]Website URL: cgi.luddy.indiana.edu/~clefevr/activism-styles-v1.cgi
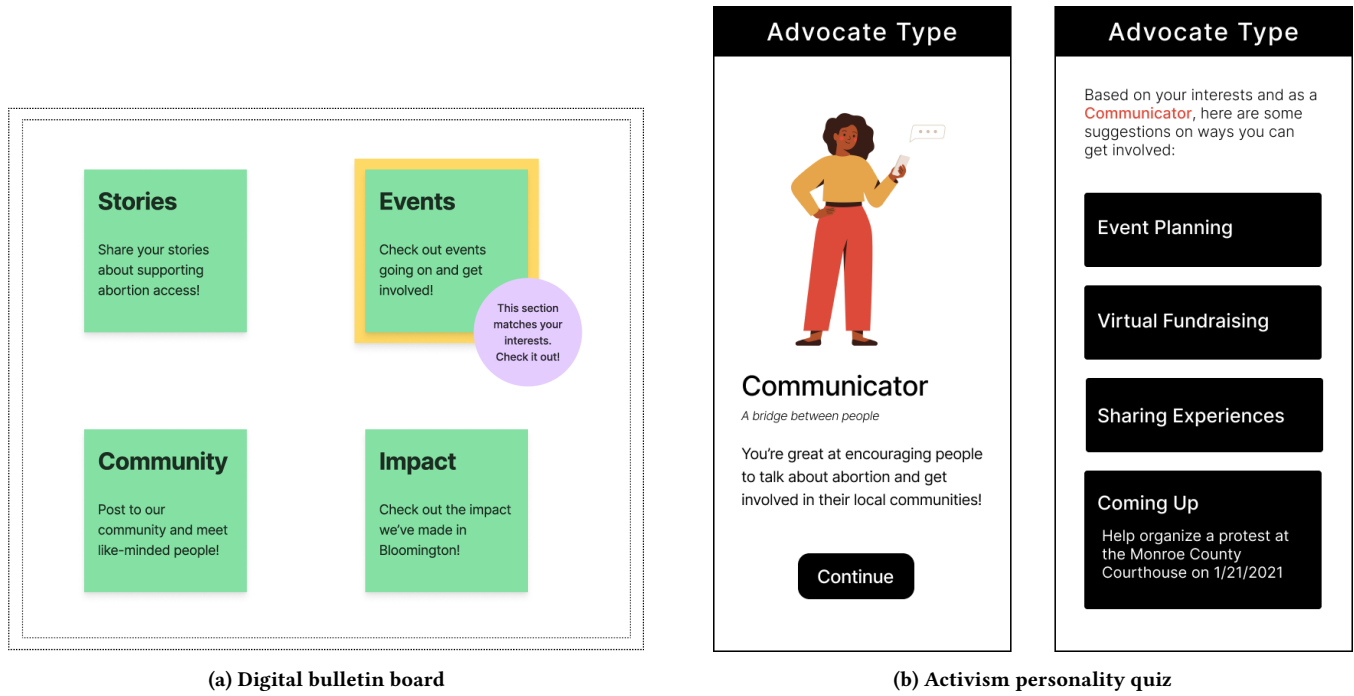[2]Source code: github.com/col-lefevre/activism-styles

(a) Digital bulletin board

(b) Activism personality quiz

Figure 1: Example screen mock-ups from Concept Exploration

1 Potential Activist

2 Learns about the Abortion Activism Style Quiz

3 Answers 12 questions and completes the quiz

6 Finds inspiration from community stories

5 Explores recommendations on how to get involved

4 Gets matched to an "Activism Style"

Figure 2: Probe Design (vector images ©Freepik.com; UI is our own)

features are based on our 14 participants' feedback and activist experiences.

An important consideration in the algorithm's design was data privacy. Many of our participants expressed concern over anonymity when using technology for activism. To address this concern, we store this data in a local browser cookie using Flask's `session` module. This cookie is automatically deleted on browser close; users can also manually clear their data using the probe's "Your Privacy" tab, which outlines the probe's data collection practices.

6   FUTURE WORK

In this in-progress work, we aligned ourselves with pro-choice abortion activism as "academic accomplices," conducting design interviews with 14 Indiana potential / current pro-choice activists. Using these interviews, we then designed a cultural probe to investigate opportunities for HCI practitioners to support pro-choice abortion activists in the emerging United States political health context. In future, we plan to deploy our probe, further investigating how technology can facilitate pro-choice abortion activist communities and support involvement in activist activities.

7   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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