
The Double Bind: Social Values and Design Choices

Dustin O'Hara

University of California,
Los Angeles
dustin.ohara@gmail.com

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The Future of Platforms as Sites of Work, Collaboration and Trust
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Abstract

The timebanking movement could be described as part of a wider community-based non-profit wing of the so called sharing economy. Timebank members exchange services using time credits, an alternative time-based currency that can be characterized as a double bind: it is simultaneously like money and not like money. Timebanking represents a form of civic engagement, and with the double bind quality of time credits makes for a compelling case study that allows us to think about how values and knowledge are formalized into design choices and processes; and what the future of cooperative platforms might look like.

Author Keywords

Sharing economy, timebanking, alternative currency, civic engagement, trust, collaboration, taxonomies

ACM Classification Keywords

Human Factors, Design, Economics

Introduction

The timebanking movement, on which my discussion is based, could be described as part of a wider community-based non-profit wing of the so called sharing economy. There is growing evidence that suggests the business models associated with the

corporate wing of the sharing economy are contributing to greater economic inequality [12, 15]. This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by introducing timebanking as an alternative to corporate sharing economy, while also critiquing the timebanking movement's currency centric model and organizational strategies. This critique is not meant to deride timebanking but rather inspire possibilities for the design of future cooperative platforms and interventions into the broader (sharing) economy. Timebanking is often framed as an alternative currency or market system. Anchored to an equitable evaluation of time, and the aspirational goals of social inclusion and community building; timebank members use time credits or time dollars to exchange services with one another. The emphasis on a currency centric explanation, and the bank metaphor, is also reflected in the design of timebanking systems; which often foreground the exchange of time credits and account balances as a key points of information that users interface with [2]. The conceptual design of time credits can be characterized as a double bind; they are simultaneously like money and not like money. Time credits are like money to the extent that they offer users a measurable unit of value, a system of accounts, and the ability to exchange debts with a third party [13]. Where time credits radically diverge from money in how they measure value - specifically the value of (labour) time [5]. With time credits all time is of equal value; be it the hour of a hedge fund manager or the hour of a gardener. I argue in this brief paper that the double bind of time credits offers us a conceptual opening for considering the implicit values and design priorities within contemporary usability standards. That is to say, usability standards are predicated upon common ontological foundations of how we think of

ourselves and the world [17]. Time credits are only one facet of the organizing strategies of timebanks, but because of their novelty they tend to dominate explanations and descriptions of timebanking. In this paper I also focus on the production of taxonomies often found in timebanks. Collaboratively produced and used within a situated social context, these local taxonomies are representative of community capacities, desires, and needs. I argue that the organizing strategies of the timebanking movement are predicated on a cooperative model of humans as social creatures, and in practice is tantamount to John Dewey's democratic notion of social inquiry [7]. Ultimately, from a design perspective this leads us to the functional questions of cooperative platforms: Can we create platforms that build upon the local knowledge of organizers, facilitate sustained relationships, trust, and non-transactional notions of value? Rather than looking for specific technologies, can we locate critical design priorities and choices?

The Double Bind

With the use of time credits there exists a genealogy that can be traced to nineteenth century industrial democracy and worker-owned cooperative shops that issued their own 'labour notes'. The labour notes of the nineteenth century were explicitly bound up in much larger political projects of socialist and anarchist organizing [19]. In contrast to these earlier efforts, the culture of timebanking is far more focused on the social and interpersonal dimensions of wellbeing and healing [4]. In this way the timebanking movement echoes earlier feminist critiques that aimed to place greater value on unseen and unorganized domestic labour. The differences between time credits and money are not only indicative of political ideals, but of foundational

concepts of human nature: are we social creatures who find fulfillment through collaboration? Or are we self-interested and calculated in our choices? For Aristotle it was the former. He argues that humans are inherently social creatures, *zoon politikon* or the political animal, whose happiness is derived from our capacity to collaborate with one another [1]. With the rise of early industrial capitalism came a scientific rationality closely tied to classic liberal economics that would reframe our understanding of the individual as fundamentally self-interested [8]. Emblematic of this line of thinking is the notion of a rational actor. The rational actor model frames all human values and features of social life as instrumental to its own (profitable) ends [8]; while rational choice theory more generally aims to describe complex social phenomena through the composition of elementary individual actions [6]; a striking similarity to computational processes. In practice this rationality has been immensely powerful at enabling firms to achieve greater operational efficiency, and minimizing risk by externalizing social and environmental costs [10]. From Taylorist measurements of workers and industrial mechanization, to contemporary HCI and user profiling, the long arch of this process is often characterized by a transfer of knowledge from humans to automated technologies. This transfer of knowledge is often discussed as a process of displacement or augmentation of contingent and precarious workers [14]. This is the common narrative used to describe both historic and contemporary changes in labor markets and modes of production; a story that computing is deeply entangled in. From this perspective we might view the conceptual design of timebanking as echoing this desire to formalize or mechanize human knowledge. In the case of timebanking it is a desire to formalize the human capacity for empathy and

inclusion; and to create a framework that accounts for the social and environmental costs that are unaccounted for within the dominant market logic. This latter point aligns timebanking with a wider set of discourses surrounding state welfare and local sustainability [4]. Through my fieldwork I found organizers could talk at length about the political and societal value of alternative currencies and the value of time credits, while simultaneously being the first to dismiss the notion of time credits as a legitimate currency. This dismissal is at the heart of the double bind and is part of an instrumental logic that in its own right frames all organizing strategies of the timebank, and even their productive activities, as in service of the social goals of facilitating relationships and building community.

Situated Taxonomies and Social Inquiry

While there is much discussion of time credits the exchange of services between individual timebank members, in practice most successful timebanks are characterized by regular group activities and ongoing group projects. Of course the critical prerequisite for any of this is the presence of supportive home and partnering institutions with physical spaces where organizers and members can congregate. The act of physically bringing neighbors together for productive collaborative ends, represents a form of civic engagement that acknowledges the fact that humans are inherently social animals whose behavior is not reducible to self-interested alone [1, 7, 8]. Through my fieldwork it became clear that timebank gatherings have an implicit dual function: the explicitly stated purpose of the gathering (such as a monthly barn raising gardening event), and then the more subtle function of creating a space where members can build

self-confidence and reimagine their sense of self-worth while building relationships. Collaboratively produced taxonomies, that represent community interests and capacities play key role in this organizing process. Timebank members self-identify their skills and interests, and in doing so index themselves within the community taxonomy, this process often involves members articulating their contribution and desires which is directly tied to process of re-imagining their self-worth. As a social technology it is strikingly emblematic of John Dewey's critique of classic liberalism - that individuality and freedom are not the product of an absence of external constraints, but rather a self-reflexive process of social action [7]. In many ways Dewey's argument is a return to the much earlier conception of human nature put forth by Aristotle [1]. But for Dewey this process of a public coming into being, through dialogue and social inquiry is central to his definition of democratic process [7]. The process of social inquiry, operates on several levels within the timebanking movement. Through the sustained organizing of bringing people together, from potlucks and gardening groups, to organizing committees, a social body and public dialogue emerges. The use of software and collaboratively produced taxonomies adds an additional symbolic representational layer of interaction that is directly implicated in this process. The organizational strategies of timebanks cannot be understood in isolation; but rather as a kind of boundary object that instantiates specific values within a full stack of material and social conditions [3]; reinforcing this Deweyan notion of freedom as social action [7].

Conclusion

In this paper I have briefly discussed how different notions of the individual (from the political animal to the self-interested rationalizer) inform a broader instrumental framing of human capacities and values; and how this is represented in the design priorities of infrastructures and platforms we inhabit. Through the design process there is a formalizing of knowledge that is directly tied into the replication and reproduction of social conditions. The double bind quality of timebanking offers us a compelling case study to consider how social values and notions of civic engagement resist or become formalized into design processes. To conclude I will leave you with a set of open ended questions: Can we design platforms that enable and build upon the local knowledge organizers? Is it possible to create non-transactional notions of value? And the social conditions for sustained relationships and trust? Rather than looking for a specific technology is it possible to locate the critical design choices that might support these goals?

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