

Toward the Relationality and Ethics of Producing Alternative Research Outcomes and Knowledge Dissemination

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Background and Research Setting

The city of Detroit has become a “playground” for public and private institutions to deploy surveillance technologies (e.g., Project Green Light, Facial Recognition, ShotSpotter, automatic license plate reader) in the name of reducing crime and promoting community safety. Yet, Detroit community members are often excluded from discussions concerning the expansion of surveillance infrastructures in the city, as well as the investment and deployment of such technologies within their communities (Baker et al., 2022).

Critical questions regarding community members' perceptions of safety and how to better support their safety needs remain unaddressed in these political and popular discourses (Detroit Community Technology Project, 2019; Gross, 2018). Therefore, following the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), I collaborated with the Eastside Community Network, a community organization on the Eastside of Detroit, to conduct a photovoice project with eleven mid-aged and senior Detroit residents.

Photovoice is a CBPR and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach based on the understanding that people are experts in their own lives (Wang, 1999). Through photovoice, community members document and communicate their lived experiences and stories in the form of photography. Developed by researchers in public health and social work, the photovoice approach aims to create a space for participants to document both community assets and concerns, reflect on the process of producing the photos, discuss the photo artifacts with community members, and eventually communicate with broader stakeholders and audiences, such as policymakers and community leaders (ibid; Wang et al., 2004). In this sense, photovoice aims to mitigate power imbalances and boundaries between researchers and participants, institutions and communities, as well as expert knowledge and situated knowledge.

In our photovoice project, community members documented their personal and communal safety experiences, as well as their perceptions of surveillance technologies, by taking photographs on their smartphones. These photographs and accompanying stories depict how the sense of safety among Detroit residents is deeply situated in their relationships with other human and nonhuman actors. The meaning of relational safety is thus socially situated and inherently multiple—from avoiding bodily harm at home and in public spaces to seeking peace and harmony of body-mind that is outside the prescribed fear (see Lu et al, 2023a). These diverse perspectives on safety challenge the narrow definitions often associated with surveillance technologies, stimulating reflection and discussion among participants regarding the potential consequences of such technologies.

Organizing a Community-Based Photo Exhibition

To engage the broader community in the discussion of safety and surveillance, participants expressed their willingness to organize a community-based event that brings the community and neighbors together to share photos and stories and continue discussing the subject matter. Therefore, following the participants' input, I closely collaborated with my community partner to plan and organize a community-based photo

exhibition titled “Every Photo Has a Story: An Eastside Story on Safety and Surveillance from Behind the Lens,” which took place two months after the final photovoice workshop.

This exhibition was held at the community center space and attracted nearly a hundred community members, media personnel, activists, and academics. The event featured the eleven photovoice participants and the photos they took and selected during the photovoice project (see Figure 1). Based on participants’ feedback, the event served as a social mixer and included catering services from a local small business. We also organized several activities at the event space to engage the attendees, such as a post-it wall where attendees could share their thoughts on safety and surveillance issues in the community, and a Polaroid camera stand where attendees could take instant photos with their family and friends. Additionally, one of the photovoice participants surprised us by bringing a collection of her own vintage cameras to the event, sparking conversations among attendees about individual and shared memories associated with the different cameras.



Figure 1: a) Left: View of the exhibition space; b) Right: Two exhibition attendees viewing a photograph display.

Overall, this community-based event was a creative venue for participants to share their stories and reflections derived from the photovoice project. This kind of knowledge dissemination was not possible through written academic publications. Crucially, it served as a communal space where community members could come together, encounter one another, and engage in discussions concerning safety and surveillance. By staging a physical setting and organizing a dedicated event specifically designed to encourage these conversations, attendees not only gained insight into resident participants’ experiences and perspectives regarding safety and surveillance issues within the community but also actively contributed and shared their own insights.

Certainly, organizing a community-based event like this was not without challenges. It is important for us to attend to the background labor and ongoing negotiation that went into organizing such events and thereby the making of “alternative research outcomes.” I have documented the challenges and key takeaways from co-organizing this event with my community partner in a recent case study in CHI 2023 (see Lu et al., 2023b). These takeaways include 1) Engaging with community members from the beginning to the end to center their voices and vision, 2) Being open to a diversity of situated knowledge,

identifying collective capacity, and fostering diverse contributions, 3) Identifying bureaucratic challenges and developing solutions early on, 4) Reducing the burden of labor placed on community organizers, 5) Utilizing multiple networks to promote the event across a broad set of stakeholders, and 6) Identifying opportunities for sustaining engagement and impact in the future. Building on these takeaways, below I briefly reflect on the *relationality* of “alternative outcomes” in the research setting, in the hope of provoking dialogue on the ethics of producing alternative research outcomes in this workshop.

Resituating “Alternative Research Outcomes” in Social Relations

HCI researchers have shown a growing interest in disseminating their work and research findings in creative ways, such as tweets, zines, booklets, videos, and community-based events, as described earlier. The rationale behind producing alternative research outcomes varies, including empowering communities, increasing the researcher's visibility, and promoting the influence of the research work. These new media and methods of knowledge dissemination have indeed enabled creative ways to reach intended and unintended audiences. However, my concern lies with the potential uncritical practices associated with producing alternative research outcomes, which may overlook the labor, relationality, and materiality involved in their production. These uncritical practices run the risk of treating “alternative research outcomes” as pre-existing, self-contained commodities ready for extraction and exchange. This approach parallels algorithmic data production where data points are considered “neutral” representations of an immutable reality, disregarding their contextual nature and the removal of social relations.

Instead, I want to call out the relationality of “alternative research outcomes.” These alternative outcomes emerge and circulate through contingent encounters within specific temporal, spatial, and situated contexts. In other words, the creation of alternative outcomes is socially situated, and their distribution shapes new social relations. For instance, we cannot simply reduce a photovoice exhibition to a platform for researchers and community organizers to disseminate community members’ photos and stories. Rather, it serves as a space for multifaceted encounters, involving community members, organizers, researchers, and importantly, the photos, stories, and other non-human actors that come together. It is within these encounters that we can begin to consider how the symbolic and practical meanings of alternative research outcomes are socially produced and enacted, as well as the power dynamics at play in this process. Through the lens of relationality, we can perhaps start raising ethical questions regarding the production of alternative research outcomes, aiming to avoid falling back into the logic of knowledge colonization and epistemic violence often present in traditional written academic publications (Smith, 2021).

References

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