



Towards Labor Transparency in Situated Computational Systems Impact Research

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ABSTRACT

Researchers seeking to examine and prevent technology-mediated harms have emphasized the importance of directly engaging with community stakeholders through participatory approaches to computational systems research. However, recent transformations in strategies of corporate capture within the tech industry pose significant challenges to established participatory practices. In this paper we extend existing critical participatory design scholarship to highlight the exploitative potential of labor relationships in community collaborations between researchers and participants. Drawing on a reflexive approach to our own experiences conducting agonistic participatory research on emerging technologies at a large technology company, we highlight the limitations of doing participatory work within such contexts by empirically illustrating how and when these relationships threaten to appropriate and alienate participant labor. We argue that a labor-conscious approach to computational systems impact research is critical for countering the commodification of inclusion and invite fellow researchers to more actively investigate such dynamics. To this end, we provide (1) a framework for documenting divisions of labor within participatory research, design, and data practices, and (2) a series of short provocations that help locate and inventory sites of extraction within participatory engagements.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design; Collaborative and social computing design and evaluation methods.**

KEYWORDS

impact, inclusion, labor, participatory design, agonism, documentation, transparency

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, calls for participatory research within the Fairness, Accountability and Transparency (FAccT) literature have gained momentum. Critical reviews of ‘lab-centric’ approaches to equity and justice have noted the futility and counterproductive nature of interventions that improve documentation, model fairness, and augment explainability without input from communities affected by the implementation of computational systems [29, 62]. Researchers seeking to examine and prevent technology-mediated harms have likewise noted the need for more thorough understandings of pre-existing social inequalities and more direct engagements with community stakeholders [42, 55, 60]. Within FAccT itself, contributors have advocated for extending research “in the near future” to address social values of diversity and inclusion and to work more closely with stakeholders in order to have “positive, real-world impact” [43]. These calls, as a whole, are part of a larger trend towards *sociotechnical* interventions that account for the broader historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which technology is used [57].

Emphasizing the methodological nuance of participatory research, however, many within and beyond FAccT have warned against inadvertently co-opting participation and establishing extractive relationships with affected communities, especially given the centralized distribution of power within the technology industry [36, 51, 62, 70]. In this paper, we contribute to work on questions of power and authority within computational impact research, as well as to the critical participatory design literature, through an analysis of how *labor dynamics* factor into participatory agendas that seek to evaluate or forecast technology-mediated harms in corporate contexts.

Drawing from our experiences developing participatory research, design, and data practices within a large technology company as part of the Responsible and Inclusive Technology Participatory Initiative (RITPI), we formulate an alternative understanding of participation as a potential *form of work*. Faced with new demands to produce community-validated insights, publications, and technologies, we contend that industry wide trends towards the “commodification of inclusion” [5, 37] risk interpellating participants as *laboring subjects* while simultaneously obfuscating their work as such. Using RITPI as a case study, we illustrate the effect of this obfuscation on participants’ working conditions such as compensation, the distribution of research gains, economies of reputation and credit, as well as issues of value and ownership. Our case also

illustrates the value of adopting a labor-sensitive approach to participatory research in corporate contexts by making these dynamics visible and therefore negotiable with participants.

We highlight, in particular, (1) the production of participatory artifacts, (2) the process of securing informed consent, and (3) the authorship of research findings as three key sites where extractive labor dynamics can be contested. These sites are not definitive; they may vary depending on specific incentives and constraints within different research contexts. Given this variability, we contribute a series of guiding provocations as well as a documentation schema to surface and trace divisions of labor within participatory approaches to computational systems impact research. We propose that documentation, more expansively conceived as a mode of negotiation with participants, can help align the methodological decisions of impact research with the social and institutional conditions of normative values like transparency.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Corporate Capture of Inclusion

Over the past decade, the technology industry has experienced a shift in its engagement with ethics and accountability [26, 50, 63]. The depth of this transformation remains to be determined and is subject to ongoing investigation; what has been evidenced so far is an increase in public announcements, marketing campaigns, and value statements by technology companies that emphasize investments in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts and boast technical and governance solutions to reduce bias, increase explainability, and demonstrate transparency [32, 70]. In the absence of substantive and society-centered transformations, however, such corporate strategies to advance ‘ethical tech’ could amount to performative moves that (among many other things) fetishize inclusion as a mode of absolution, as a way of recuperating reputations and returning to prior epochs of optimism. This fetishization instrumentalizes inclusion such that hiring a visibly more diverse workforce and demonstrating engagement with community representatives advances corporate reputational goals, without necessarily moving towards equity and justice [1].

Furthermore, as Hoffman [37] has elucidated, inclusion discourses and initiatives can be used to obscure, rather than challenge, existing power relations within the technology industry and society more broadly. Drawing on examples of census data collection practices that had significant implications to the sovereignty, mobility, and survival of indigenous, immigrant, and religious communities, Hoffman explains that inclusion has historically served state and colonial projects of control. Benjamin [5] has similarly argued that, while operating within racist structures, inclusion in science and technology tends to expose Black communities to greater regimes of surveillance and hypervisibility, all while establishing a dynamic that refuses to meaningfully see Black people as something other than an object of inquiry. In an analysis of Internet technologies grounded in theories of racial capitalism, McMillan Cottom links inclusion to labor and value production, leveraging the term *predatory inclusion* to capture “the logic, organization, and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms” [46]. Predatory inclusion has in other contexts described the strategic targeting of

of Black homeowners in predatory lending practices in the name of uplifting previously excluded communities [56, 65]. By employing the term *predatory inclusion* we mean to center the ways that inclusion can be commodified and leveraged to maximize profit at the expense of affected communities.

The instrumentalization and commodification of inclusion within the ‘ethical tech’ industry make examining how participatory approaches can serve as apparatuses for corporate capture timely, if not exceedingly urgent. Motivated by this realization and following Laufer et al.’s call to scrutinize structural facets of justice as they relate to power and capitalism [43], we explore the conflicts between corporate and research interests in inclusion. The section that follows sets the stage for such an analysis, providing an overview of existing methodologies and approaches to participation that are critical of extractive drives.

2.2 Participatory Practice & Its Limits

Growing interest in participatory approaches can be attributed, in part, to the utility of stakeholder inclusion as a means to think through the social consequences of existing and emerging technologies. Notable examples can be found in recent work that brings researchers and publics together around design fiction, speculative civics, and critical futures [24, 28, 35]. The uptake of design workshops, participatory games and prototyping and other methods of co-creation, and value-sensitive design, has likewise elicited critical strains of research that explore the challenges that come with the inclusion of participants within technology design and development efforts. Pierre et al.’s work [51], for instance, reflects on community data practices to illustrate how projects which collaborate with community stakeholders as a means to access and benefit from community-expertise places undue burden on participants and risk reproducing historical epistemic injustices [51]. Similarly, Harrington et al. have deconstructed common participatory practices like the design workshop to illustrate their systematic reproduction of perspectives of privilege and power [36]. Scholars advocating for decolonial approaches to participatory action research have also identified tendencies in ‘Northern’ expressions of participatory design to instrumentalize participation as a means to achieving scientific universalization [15, 16, 27]. Salazar et al., for example, have argued for the importance of returning participatory approaches to their roots in Latin American liberatory practice [15]. As a whole, this body of critical scholarship reveals structural misalignments in ownership, values and decision-making power within participatory practice [31] and its tendency to impose affective demands [25] and epistemic burden [51] on participants.

Stakeholder engagement protocols are often entangled within the broader politics to manufacture consent and legitimize injustices across research and design domains, from participatory ML systems to urban design and international development [58, 59]. Especially when practiced within corporate contexts, “participation washing” and risks of extraction and exploitation can be understood as extensions of a broader problem of corporate capture within the technology industry.

One particularly meaningful contribution towards addressing these dynamics has been organizing around the notion of *mutual*

benefit, which seeks to minimize the extraction of knowledge or resources from community members and ensure they stand to benefit from their participation. Mutual benefit approaches tend to emphasize the creation of shared value, discovery of resources, and the redistribution of outcomes [8, 10]. Such studies position participatory design as a means to excavate “complementary competencies [that are] mutually recognized as valuable resources” [8]. There are also ‘user-gains’ perspectives on participant benefit that attend to participants’ personal and professional gains, e.g., skills-acquisition, educational opportunities, and social networking [10, 41], though some have noted the relatively modest nature of such gains [11, 66]. Related to these mutual benefit approaches are collaborative design methods that center benefit as an indirect result of larger societal and environmental improvements, precipitated by participatory design processes. Less focused on transactional or redistributive logics, these methods aim to generate social justice solutions [19, 39] or serve as spaces for social action and civic participation [2, 44].

Throughout our analysis of participatory impact research in corporate contexts, we are theoretically and methodologically informed by the critical participatory approaches above, especially their attentiveness to issues of politics and structural power within participatory research. At the same time, we extend these approaches by contributing a complimentary analytical focus on the *labor dynamics* implied in participatory research, building on nascent recognition of ‘participation as work’ [59] to specifically interrogate the *appropriation of value* generated through participants’ inclusion given the current moment of ethical reckoning in the technology industry. This includes, for example, an awareness of the temporal limitations of mutual benefit, particularly the logic of redistribution in which extractive dynamics are addressed only after the fact of their occurrence, i.e., after corporate value has already been appropriated from participants. It also includes an attentiveness to how design thinking exercises “might articulate racialized understandings of labor, judgement, and the subject,” thereby maintaining whiteness at the apex of global hierarchies of labor [40]. By focusing on the interactions that precede the production of value, particularly the division of labor within participatory research and the figuration of participants as laboring research subjects, we hope to highlight some of the critical moments within the design of participatory sessions where we might be able to resist inherent extractive drives.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 Institutional Context

Our work takes place within a large technology company amid growing corporate interest in the societal impact of computing systems. RITPI was formed in June 2022 as part of a larger effort within the company to advance a culture that more purposefully takes into consideration the societal implications of technology creation and use. The goals of this broader effort include the development of frameworks, methods, and tools that advance more responsible and inclusive practices, as well as the creation and leveraging of technology to support communities in their own efforts towards social justice. In both cases, engaging with communities that are affected by sociotechnical systems was and continues to be of critical importance; however, given the dangers of instrumentalizing

and commodifying inclusion outlined in Section 2, figuring out how to establish equitable engagements with participants strongly influenced whether these efforts advanced equity and justice or extended dynamics of extraction.

RITPI was therefore created with two main objectives: (1) to critically investigate the potential social impact of emerging technologies by centering the perspectives of those who have been, are being, or could be affected by them and (2) to design and pilot methods and tools to facilitate these engagements, in ways that could be applied by others within our larger research effort. At the time of writing, RITPI has led to four pilots of general participatory workshop methods, associated interface prompts, and guidelines for community engagement, all co-designed with participants. Thematically, these engagements have focused on neurotechnologies and voice-based technologies (e.g., synthetic speech, voiceprints); this is due to a combination of forces, including company interest, societal considerations, and our own personal backgrounds—the first author has a social science background with experience using participatory methods in labor organizing, the second author has a background in neuroscience, and the third author has a background in the history of science with a focus on speaker verification technologies.

3.2 Collaborators

Over the course of three months from June to August 2022, the first- and second-authors reached out and connected with Business Resource Group (BRG) leaders to assess whether recruitment of participants through BRG channels was possible. BRGs are voluntary associations that foster community around shared backgrounds, identities, lived experiences, or interests, and they typically provide spaces for resource sharing, mentorship, event organization, and discussion of issues of relevance to each community. Many BRGs have their own community standards and guidelines designed to protect individual and group privacy, minimize tokenization, and provide designated spaces for support.

Given this context, the first- and second-authors presented the RITPI project and its initial goals to BRG leaders and, only after receiving their permission, shared information about the initiative with their respective BRG members. This was done to minimize the potential of imposing our presence in these communities, which may not have been wanted or beneficial. Twenty-four participants and collaborators from BRGs were recruited to the project and were joined by the first- and second-authors in the co-design of the pilot studies. The third author did not join the co-design collaboration, but contributed to the historical and theoretical framing of RITPI’s contributions.

3.3 Agonism in Computational Systems Research

Although we exercised caution in how we approached BRG members, a number of tensions remained unresolved, signaling to the nuances of participatory engagements within a large technology company. Working with BRGs on an initiative centered on social responsibility while delivering the benefits of this research to a corporation raised questions around the terms of mutual benefit, the balance between the burden and the gains of participation, and

the potential incompatibilities between business interests and the needs of community members.

In order to explore the contradictions of conducting societal impact research within a corporate setting, we adopted general principles from the tradition of Agonistic Participatory Design [7, 7, 23]. Briefly, this meant that the initiative was committed to centering the productive potential of exploring *tensions* instead of manufacturing a false consensus among community members [48, 49, 53] which would fail to shift power relationships in a meaningful way and, worse, enable corporate capture [70] and participation-washing. We therefore encouraged all parties of the collaborative effort to disagree, contest, and struggle with both the content and structure of our research, as well as the different interests driving it.

In these ways, agonistic commitments oriented our collaborative approach with participants, which in turn informed the resultant methods, prompts, and guidelines. A more in-depth report of these resulting artifacts, co-authored with participants, is forthcoming. In this paper, we only discuss these artifacts briefly to highlight how they speak to agonistic principles.

4 APPROACH

4.1 Data Collection

At the time of writing, work towards the RITPI project has led to four participatory tool pilots and over nine hours of audio and video recordings, in addition to a number of co-created design artifacts and participant responses from three rounds of semi-structured interviews and two open-ended follow-up surveys. For the purposes of this paper, however, we limit ourselves to experiential observation and auto-ethnographic data collected by the first and second-authors. This includes field notes taken over the course of 6 months of setting-up the participatory sessions and engaging with participants, a time during which we collaborated with participants and community partners on the planning, production, and analysis of the pilots. We also rely on analytic memos that were taken during the author's debriefs of broader conversations that were had about the RITPI project, its objectives, principles, and goals, as well as the larger corporate context in which it was situated.

4.2 Analysis

We exercise methodological reflexivity in our approach to this case study. This means centering our analysis around the socio-political contexts that condition participatory modes of data creation and knowledge production, situated as they are, not only in the researcher's subjective 'ways of seeing' but also in the collective ideological and material structures within which research processes are situated, e.g., from how research problems are constructed to how findings are reported [12, 13]. Our analysis proceeds via systematic investigations into our own positions within the social structure of academic traditions and research conventions [20]. We also remain hyper-sensitive to the field epistemologies that might otherwise suggest that our inquiry can be conducted from a scientific gaze that stands outside these structures, as if from a 'view from nowhere' [34]. By documenting our experiential observations, we recognize and interrogate the unquestioned and abstract duality between researcher and research subject as it appears in our data,

thus reflexively grounding these roles as historically contingent. By moving between description and interpretation of our implicit methodological decisions [51], we situate them in their personal, socio-political, and economic context as labor relations that operate in concert with a broader regime of corporate inclusion.

5 CASE STUDY

With this background and approach in mind, we present the RITPI case as an empirical illustration of the value of labor-sensitivity to make the exploitative potential of these collaborations visible. In order to maintain an iterative movement between observation and interpretation, our narration of the case study follows an auto-ethnographic structure. We present three "ethnographic episodes"[54] wherein we first report on our initial orientations towards the labor of participants—constructed through fieldnotes and re-readings of our initial research design—and then contrast these methodological decisions with the subsequent revisions we made after encountering tensions between our participatory principles and the labor dynamics revealed to us through our approach. To illustrate these tensions, we draw directly from debrief memos between the authors on describing the progress of the RITPI initiative while, at the same time, situating these experiences in relation to the positionality of the researcher, e.g. disciplinary training, hierarchies of expertise, and institutional incentives.

5.1 Episode 1: Production of Participatory Artifacts

The primary objective of the RITPI project—i.e, to elicit and document the perspectives of participants with respect to the potential impact of emerging technologies on themselves and the communities they belong to—was conceived in isolation from participants over the course of several months in early 2022, and was formulated in response to a perceived need within our larger research group to develop and deliver methods for conducting socially responsible, community-based impact research. During this time we explored several critical participatory design methods—including agonistic participatory design, participatory speculative design, and infrastructural speculation—and synthesized them into four participatory prototyping workshops of 5-7 participants each.

At the time, we envisioned that participatory prototyping would produce speculative artifacts and, through discussing their contexts of deployment, participants would be able to share their excitement on how emerging technologies might serve their communities and raise concerns about the ways in which these technologies might reproduce structures of inequality with respect to race, class, gender, ability, etc. We hoped these artifacts could act as a means by which participants could voice issues they may not otherwise be able to due to power dynamics [35]. However, as the project started recruiting members from BRGs in June 2022, we noticed an emerging tension between business interests and those of participants. In a debrief meeting, the second author remarked on these conflicting responsibilities:

There is so much pressure to produce results in this project, particularly in the form of best practices, reproducible methods or exercises, or publications... and none of that pressure is coming from the participant

group – it's coming from others who have in some way, shape, or form 'supported' the effort. (Second author, debrief memo)

This prompted us to question the extent to which the methodological decision to translate participatory principles into prototyping workshops had been influenced by research and corporate pressures. We realized that what conventionally counts as participatory value is circumscribed by demands to produce artifacts that can be adopted with measurable impact, which is exemplified by the assertion that “in order for participatory design to be successful, it has to result in an [...] artifact that can be (and in fact *is*) appropriated in real use” [67]. This bias towards tangible, deliverable, and solution-oriented design artifacts [9] was reinforced by a business culture that defines research value by particular quality standards, corporate KPIs, and output-based reward structures [14].

We also began to reflect on how participation was circumscribed by DEI marketing logics. For our project to be considered valuable and receive sustained support, we needed to demonstrate its effectiveness in eliciting and documenting *diverse* community perspectives. Because the lack of diversity in the technology industry has been identified as one of the factors that have led to some of technology's differential social harms, the inclusion of diverse perspectives stands to benefit society; however, from the point of view of corporate interest, including diverse perspectives serves an additional purpose. Demonstrating that diverse groups have been consulted during participatory design allows corporations to validate technology as community-approved, thereby enhancing corporate reputational and profit goals.

Such macro-level dynamics were further complicated by latent constructions of an *a priori* community. Reflecting on our project, we noticed that diversity and inclusion logics could present a contradictory demand for participants. While community members volunteer to join BRGs, these groups are organized around company-defined communities of “diversity and inclusion” (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Native American and Indigenous, Pan-Asian, LGBTQ+, PWDA, Veteran, and Women). Rather than participating on their own terms, then, participants might feel pressure to perform “community expertise,” i.e., to speak on behalf of entire communities, irrespective of whether such interventions are representative of their own experiences. The preconception that participant identity itself holds value could foreclose avenues for participants to stand in tension and contradiction with their identities or the identities that were assumed of them, which would limit their opportunities to exercise suspicion or disagreement with normative understandings of belonging.

Within this context, participatory prototyping practice would require participants to stand in the position of the *laboring subject*, a position that implied a determination on *who* was demanded to produce an artifact (i.e., participants) and under whose terms (i.e., researchers)—a dynamic we realized had to be avoided as much as possible. Thus, by its first pilot session, we had revised RITPI's approach to the participatory workshop to engage participants in *critical unmaking* [54]. Rather than enlist them in the ideation, prototyping, and testing of products, critical unmaking involved

inverting roles of production such that we, as the researchers, developed design artifacts in advance, only for them to be *deconstructed* by participants during the sessions.

In an exercise we termed ‘Deconstruction,’ we encouraged participants to engage in the unmaking of the social worlds and infrastructures that the pre-designed artifacts were narratively embedded in [69]. Contesting the imagined “lifeworlds” of these artifacts, such as their regulatory, environmental and repair conditions [69], participants were encouraged to unearth each products' conditions of possibility—e.g., the taken-for-granted fictions presumed by their designs that would have to hold in order for the existence of the design to make sense. Through re-imagining participatory prototyping in this way, we hoped to open up a broader field of contention in which participants could exercise radical skepticism and disagreement about these technological futures rather than produce marketable solutions to them.

5.2 Episode 2: Securing Informed Consent

Recruitment for the RITPI project's participatory workshops were completed by July of 2022 although its protocols would be a subject of critical interrogation for months afterward. At the center of these conversations was the Informed Consent Form (ICF). When we first approached recruitment for the RITPI project, we relied on our prior experiences with practices in User Interaction and Experience (UIX), and cognitive and clinical research, where prospective research participants are typically provided an ICF at the start of the study, asked to read it, and finally prompted to provide a signature indicating presupposed agreement with the methods, signaling an assumed willingness to be exposed to various research procedures. The practice drew from a notion of informed consent that emerged in the 1950s through 1970s as a reaction to medical paternalism and the demand of patients in clinical trials to be made aware of potential risks and benefits [3]; since then, it has transformed into a requirement across multiple research disciplines, often framed as one of the ways in which participants' autonomy is protected or upheld [52].

Yet, upon examining the ICFs implicit checkbox-approach to consent, we recognized that a typical ICF failed to capture the more rigorous conditions of collaboration that the RITPI project sought to establish, and instead implied a unidirectional relationship where participants would be *contracted* into projects which are entirely scientist-led, designed, and managed [18]. In a debrief between the first and second authors where they considered various strategies to counteract these limitations, the first author probes: “*What [is the point]? Nothing about this process feels participatory.*” (First Author, debrief meeting).

These frustrations originate in a disbelief over the power of the ICF to set all the terms and conditions of our work relationships with participants. The first author felt that, in this sense, the ICF acted much like a wage contract. Its procedural details functioned to recruit participants as *laboring subjects*, tasked to produce data and research value under interviews, design workshops, prototyping, behavioral studies, etc. Its stated benefits functioned to define the compensation of participation (or lack thereof). Through the act of consenting to these terms, participants would be simultaneously brought into the study but held at a distance—expected to engage in

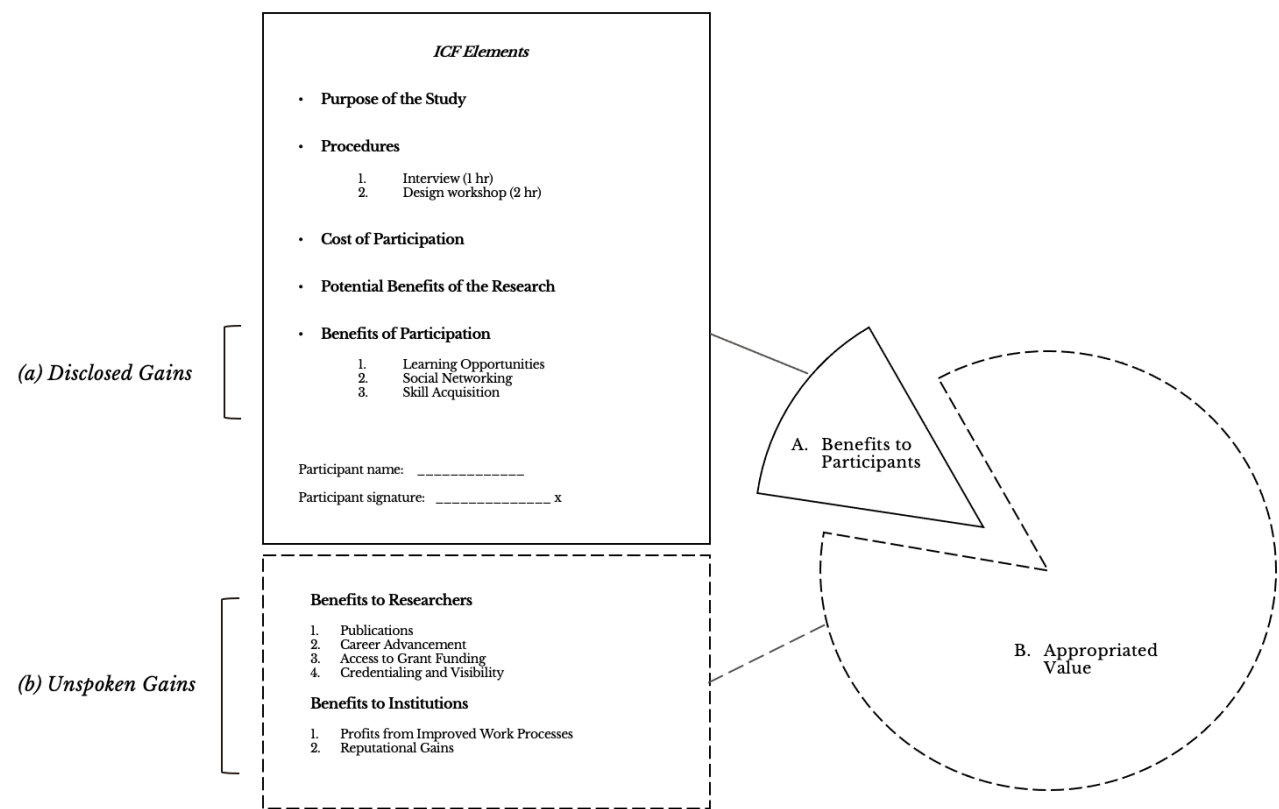


Figure 1: Implied Value Allocation of Typical Informed Consent Form. Figure comparing the ICF’s disclosure of benefits to participants (a) versus that of researchers (b) in order to highlight the value appropriated from participants (B).

the work of participation without any ownership over the research process or product.

Ownership was central to RITPI’s broader goals in its relevance to the ultimate distribution of value and gain in the research process. For instance, even if we made executive decisions to more equitably share in these gains, we realized that as long as we were in a position to prescribe the terms of this distribution in the ICF’s calculus of the costs and benefits of participation (Figure 1), the project would impose an instrumental, transactional logic onto the collaboration. What is worse, due to a general lack of transparency in both the function of the ICF and its calculus, its use in our study would have had the overall effect of appropriating the labor of participants for corporate and institutional ends.

To make this calculus less opaque, the first- and second-authors deconstructed the ICF over the course of the recruitment process; this process is summarized in Figure 1. The typical ICF predefines ‘benefits of participation’ as opportunities to upskill, network, and learn about the subject of study. However, we noticed that while these gains are stated upfront, the ICF leaves undisclosed other forms of value that are assumed to belong to researchers and their affiliated institutions. These undisclosed benefits come in the form of publications for the researcher, resources for further funding opportunities, and business insights for institutional or corporate funders, as just some examples. By dictating costs and benefits,

procedures and expected time under contract, ICFs carve out a strategic ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ to participation, leaving participants estranged from any value produced outside those terms. Yet, in the context of interrogating these assumptions, the first-author frequently wondered if there really was anything ‘outside’ this collaboration:

“Participation doesn’t stop once the [workshops] end. We will always be drawing on their insights and quotes and the data produced in the session. Why shouldn’t they be there for that?” (First Author, debrief meeting discussing co-authorship)

As a result, we began to see the ICFs can as an agent of appropriation in larger institutional apparatuses of capture. This prompted us to re-frame the ICF as a work contract and revise our RITPI’s consent protocol according to feminist models of consent, where consent is understood as an ongoing dialogue and is, thereby, reversible [61]. By late June 2022, our ICF included a rigorous opt-out policy, a radical position on data use and ownership, as well as a tiered checklist of different aspects or modes of participation that remained transparent about the value and labor associated with each. Given these, our participants’ signatures represented not only understanding and agreement but also, importantly, a willingness to collaborate and labor together towards a notion of value that

would be defined collectively and that would be recognizable as such. Moreover, this signature was understood to be not *the* moment of consent but rather *a* moment of consent, as participants could update choices, iterate on various terms, and make decisions about participation in the future, all of which required continuously revisiting consent throughout the research.

Our embrace of feminist notions of consent welcomed the possibility of refusal. By framing refusal as an election into a particular mode of participation (into tiers of time commitment and types of contributions), we sought to reframe the act of changing one's mind such that it did not carry a negative valence. For instance, if a participant chose to retract their contribution and data from analysis. Lines of communication were kept open, unless otherwise indicated, to share updates and elicit feedback irrespective of elected modes of participation. These participants could still understand their influence on the project in terms of their impact on other collaborators as well as to the journey of the broader research initiative. This approach to refusal dis-identifies the value of participant labor from data, research outcomes, or design products and lowers the stakes of changing, exiting or (re-)entering the collaboration by assuring participants of their status as full collaborators, rather than as research subjects.

5.3 Episode 3: Sharing Participatory Results

By August 2022, the RITPI project had concluded its fourth and final pilot of the participatory workshop and began a long-term, voluntary collaboration with 11 of its participants to interpret and present findings from the initiative to broader research and policy audiences. However, as interested individuals/workstreams/divisions within our large technology company started learning about the initiative and inviting us to speak on it, we noticed their requests to share results were nearly always directed at us, rather than this collective. These invitations assumed that we could speak about, and on behalf of, the participants, as well as share quotes and findings from the project. Reflecting on these invitations, the second author writes in her field notes that

“...the request [to share my interpretations of the findings] would be antithetical to the entire project thus far. It would totally re-create the researcher/participant separation and power dynamic we've been pushing against.” (Second Author, memo)

Our explanation that this value did not belong to us, and that there were therefore things we could not disclose without participants or their consent, was often met with confusion. Although we were able to decline some of the requests to share results, these interactions served as reminders of the deeply entrenched notions of labor and value production that extend far beyond personal interactions with participants but are structural conditions of knowledge production.

The first and third author would later go on to discuss the trouble with premature presentation in terms of the risk of enabling the corporate capture of participant-generated value. Within the broader “ethical tech” community, technology firms demonstrate enthusiastic participation in initiatives like RITPI primarily in service of certifying their commitments all while foreclosing the possibility of more pointed critique [70]. As long as radical participatory results are attributed to researchers and their institutions, rather than large

scale or extra-institutional community collaborators, their criticality can be easily neutralized by logics of technological solutionism, expert lenses, and personal professionalization [6].

Yet, by our training, we often unwittingly alienate participants from the articulation of research findings and their value. Status quo approaches to publishing research, exhibiting the results, defining contributions, determining the validity of the research agenda, proving the rigor of the methods, owning outcomes, and so forth, all imply the exclusion of the participants from ‘economies of credit’ [51]. We therefore typically encounter participants only in the distilled products of their labor, such as within quotes or generic descriptions of demographic data or sample size. As the RITPI project continues to work with participants to intentionally articulate and center what value means to each of them (i.e., what they hope or aim to get from our collaboration), we are doing so with a sensitivity to this political and economic context of research ownership.

In the section that follows, we discuss in more analytical depth how labor dynamics factored within these three sites of extraction, identifying the relationships that underwrite conventions around participatory production, consent, and publication.

6 DISCUSSION

For fellow researchers in FAccT and allied communities, the RITPI project serves to illustrate the value of adopting a heightened sensitivity to the labor dynamics that underwrite strategies of corporate capture [64, 68, 70]. Through reflexively situating RITPI's principles and practices within its corporate environment and larger industry discourses on diversity and inclusion, we identified a particular risk that participatory methods face: that of obfuscating participation as a form of labor and value creation, and thereby facilitating its co-option towards corporate ends. Centering the iterative—and, at times, messy—revision of RITPI's participatory approach highlights the challenges presented to both researchers and participants when ‘stakeholder engagement’ threatens to become a means of reputational gain, community-validation, and corporate-absolution [37, 46, 70]. Our research extends the call for more reflexive and transparent documentation of research and design processes to FAccT contributors interested in stakeholder engagement. The question of how to address the challenges posed by corporate entanglement is central to research programs committed to socially responsible community collaboration, especially given the value of these methods to corporate strategies that benefit from the instrumentalization of the backgrounds and identities of participants.

As we saw in the first episode of the case study, on *Production of Participatory Artifacts*, it was the act of attending to the design workshop as a *worksites* that made visible the ways that our methodological decisions can force participants into the role of a laboring subject. We witnessed the ways that researchers are incentivized and trained by their broader institutional contexts to demand a certain type of production from participants. Even where, in some cases, these demands might be voluntarily met and be ‘mutually beneficial’ [8, 11, 41], the case illustrates what is structurally problematic about these relationships. Given the power imbalance implied by the positionality of researchers and participants, the operative assumptions of what is valuable about the inclusion of

stakeholders are often established on the industry's terms. Only by first producing value that is *valuable* to participants, can questions about the equitable distribution of these gains become meaningful.

The second episode of RITPI's story, on *Securing Informed Consent*, illustrates another practical instance in which asking the question of *where the terms of participants' working conditions are established* actually revealed a critical choice-point within the otherwise invisible, everyday infrastructure of research and design processes. Where canonical scholarship on participatory design rarely report on consent practices, a labor-conscious approach highlights the function of the ICF as a labor contract, determining conditions of compensation and entitlements. In particular, RITPI's negotiations of the ICF's instrumental division between benefits to participants and the undisclosed institutional gains exemplifies another way that increased sensitivity to labor dynamics can reveal and even begin to address exploitative means by which our impact research might be built on the appropriation community labor.

Finally, in the third episode of the case study, on *Sharing Participatory Results*, we approach another infrastructural foundation of research—the authorial conventions around sharing and publishing participatory results. Through actively engaging with questions of *ownership*, we can understand that through withholding credit and other forms of recognition for the labor performed through research collaboration, we *alienate* community members from their labor, in much the same way that, on the shop floor, divisions of labor and wage contracts distance workers from any ownership over the product of their work [45]. While few critical frameworks deal with the politics of authorial convention [51], it is only through a critical interrogation with labor that these convention can be linked to a broader condition of alienation.

Taken together, the lens through which the RITPI project engaged with these implicit labor relationships can bring out unique insights to compliment both existing critical approaches to participatory design as well as scholarship on power and authority in computational impact research. RITPI explores the tensions between its mission and its corporate environment, illustrating how the obfuscation of participant labor risks reproducing dynamics of appropriation and alienation that, as such, form the basic conditions of corporate capture. If researchers and practitioners of participatory approaches seek to do community work differently, the value of participation and the terms of its creation must be negotiated with participants.

7 DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

As the case study and discussion sections above illustrate, methodological decisions within participatory engagements predetermine participants' working conditions, as well as what counts as a valuable contribution, thereby affecting compensation structures, the distribution of research value, and ownership over outcomes. For this reason, we argue that labor dynamics need to be recognized as explicit design choices that can enable or counter exploitative, opaque, inequitable, or otherwise unfavorable dynamics with and for participants. Aiming for a labor-sensitive approach to participation, we propose a series of provocations around which researchers can "organize ourselves first" [51] before reaching out to community stakeholders. We also propose a documentation practice that

can serve as a mechanism for negotiating labor dynamics with participants.

7.1 Provocations for Labor-Sensitive Collaborations in Computational Systems Research

When motivated by an agonistic approach to participation, critical reflection at the beginning or during a collaboration with participants can elucidate which choices affect labor dynamics and how. The three provocations below center the productive value of interrogating and unraveling tensions, disagreements, and discomfort [53] implicit in attempts to include diverse participants. Each provocation begins with a question and is followed by a motivating statement, addressing a particular aspect of inclusion. The provocations are the following:

- (1) **The Value of Inclusion:** *What is the implicit or unspoken value that participants' "community perspectives" hold within the participatory project?* While we might approach participants with a particular preconception of the value of bringing diverse community members directly into research and design processes, these efforts might contain latent constructions of an a priori 'community.' Instead of recruiting participants because we expect them to bring a predefined perspective, we might consider acknowledging tensions and contradictions within participants' identities so that individuals can exercise suspicion of the forms of belonging implied by narrow invocations of representation.
- (2) **The Labor of Inclusion:** *How and when might participants be asked to perform community expertise within the participatory project?* While the notion of inclusion in research might not directly imply a hierarchical labor dynamic, it is important to interrogate when including communities might respond to a demand to produce community-validated artifacts or insights in ways that only satisfy corporate interests. We might instead broaden the scope of what can be done and undone within participatory engagements, rejecting the subjectification of participants as producers of community expertise and embracing a broader understanding of the various roles within a research collaboration.
- (3) **The Investment in Inclusion:** *Who decides which participant contributions are valuable? And who decides how participant contributions are acted upon and shared?* While participatory engagements with diverse stakeholders may be gaining increasing support, the instrumentalization and commodification of inclusion in corporate settings might lead to the appropriation of value from participants and their alienation from the means to define value in their own terms. We might counter these pressures by opening up spaces for dissensus and refusal so that participants can reject corporate capture.

We recognize that answers to these provocations will vary depending on social context, the goals of collaboration, the type of participants involved, the corporate structures of sponsoring institutions, the disciplinary background of researchers, etc. This variability is important, especially considering that labor and capital are tied to forces that may be in flux and outside the control of researchers. The deeply contextual nature of labor-conscious

orientations to computational systems research should not deter us, however, from translating these insights into concrete collaborative processes.

7.2 Documentation Frameworks Towards Labor Transparency and Negotiation

Efforts around documentation as a means of advancing transparency and accountability within the technology industry have emphasized the importance of detailing information about the socio-technical features and socio-political contexts through which datasets and models are produced [4, 17, 29, 30, 38, 47]. Aligned with modes of documentation that account for power differentials, we argue that documenting the division of labor within participatory approaches to impact research is a practice that can not only enable greater transparency around the terms of value production, but also serve as a site where labor dynamics and working conditions can be contested and re-negotiated.

7.2.1 Motivation for a Labor Documentation Schema: Many existing proposals for documentation primarily identify technologists as the key users of documentation frameworks and assume that social change originates within ‘the lab’ [4, 30, 38]. Even in proposals that center the individuals subjected to data-centric harms, it is unclear how underlying theories of change translate increases in information to material empowerment, especially in a political context that lacks adequate systems of rights enforcement and where corporate entities encourage the displacement of responsibility onto individual consumers as an economic and business strategy in itself [29].

The protocol below instead shifts focus away from the technologist as an agent of change and instead centers the laborers involved in the production of technology or technical insights [47], which in this case also involves community members brought into impact research on computational systems. In this way, this schema contributes to a growing critical literature that seeks to resist the tendency within the computer sciences to reduce social outcomes to engineerable solutions within bounded, rational systems [33]. We also suggest that, as a result of FAccT’s *metadata maximalist* orientation [29]—that is, its investment in maximizing available provenance metadata—, mainstream critical research overlooks the existence and efficacy of already-established labor organizing practices, in large part because these practices are interventions on social, economic, and political institutions ‘outside the lab.’

Documentation, we suggest, can function as a method of raising political consciousness and achieving solidarity, thus serving as the foundation of successful political organizing and collective action [21, 22]. By approaching documentation as a participatory practice in itself, the act of cataloging divisions of labor can make visible the structural conditions of participants’ personal experiences of research collaboration, promote solidarity based on these shared conditions, and even open new rhetorics of contestation in relation to dynamics of appropriation and alienation. Compared to traditional MoU models used in nonprofit and community work, the documentation schema offers a non-contractual and explorative approach to negotiating the terms of community collaboration, one that explicitly pinpoints moments of value creation and puts into

practice the dynamic conception of consent discussed in Section 5.2.

7.2.2 Proposed Division of Labor Documentation Schema: The schema presented herein forwards a general set of structured steps to simultaneously document and address issues of under-compensation, product and data ownership, and structural dynamics like the appropriation and alienation of participation labor. Rather than follow the researcher and research subject dichotomy, the schema distinguishes between tasks done by those organizing participatory research and those participating in the research, inviting a reformulation of tasks from the outset. An example of how to use this schema, based on the case study in Section 5, is provided in Table 1. The aspects of participation that ought to be documented and the steps for documentation are as follows:

- (1) **Research Site:** First, the sites or stages in the research process during which organizers and participants are engaged in value production need to be identified. Depending of the specificities of each engagement, these sites could be demarcated based on when the community collaboration was initialized, when data was created and collected, when analysis happened, or when results were shared, among others. An explicit documentation of these sites can help sensitize annotators, which in this case are researchers and participants, to all the possible sites of extraction within a collaboration.
- (2) **Task Description:** Then, for each site identified in the previous step, the distinct tasks that need to be accomplished should be listed. Descriptions of these tasks should be narrow enough that each can be articulated as a single step in a step-by-step protocol. An explicit documentation of these tasks can help identify instances where researchers may be inadvertently acting as representatives for participants, thereby foreclosing opportunities for struggle and dissensus, or instances where participant labor is typically hidden or made invisible.
- (3) **Initial Division of Labor:** Once sites and tasks are outlined, the initial division of labor between researchers and participants needs to be defined. This initial division of labor is likely to be implicitly dictated according to the norms of the research discipline or field, as well as internal and external incentive structures. The aim of documenting the initial division of labor is to make hidden relations, tensions, and structures visible to annotators so that they can serve as a basis of negotiation between researchers and participants.
- (4) **Negotiated Division of Labor:** Having documented the initial division of labor with participants, the next step is to ask: how can these tasks be negotiated such that decision-making power and ownership are more equitably distributed? The goal of this step is to formulate tangible modifications in the design of participatory sessions to stage dissensus. The resulting division of labor should not be assumed to be fix, as it can be iteratively revised over the course of the collaboration.

7.3 Integration with Existing Practices

In both proposals, we distance ourselves from typical solutions-oriented ‘tools’ or ‘check-lists’, and instead suggest process-oriented

Table 1: Documentation of RITPI's Division of Labor

Research Site	Task Description	(A) Initial D.O.L	(B) Negotiated D.O.L
<i>(a) Initializing the Study</i>	Motivate the study	O	O
	Recruit participants	O	O
	Respond to ICF	P	P&O
	Create protocols	O	O
	Iterate protocols	O	P
<i>(b) Data Generation</i>	Determine topics/cases	O	P
	Create prototypes	P	O
	Evaluate prototypes	O	P
	Respond to surveys	P	P
<i>(c) Analysis</i>	Organize & delegate resources	O	P&O
	Process & interpret session data	O	P
	Articulate findings	O	P&O
	Disseminate results	O	P&O

Table 1. Table illustrating the use of the proposed documentation schema in practice using RITPI data. Tasks assigned to organizers as marked (O) and tasks assigned to participants are marked (P)

practices of collaborative research. Each can be iteratively applied throughout the research process and are imagined as ways to gradually orient labor transparency—for instance, a group of researchers might use these provocations during the planning phase of a project to sensitize teams to the terms of participatory work, or while grant-writing to more explicitly account for modes of value creation. Likewise, the documentation schema might function not only as a way to expose the different aspects of labor involved but also function as a living document that responds to the ongoing consent and refusal of participation; researchers might use the schema to chart trade-offs that emerge in the course of research and design collaborations.

Our aim is not to suggest that centering labor is itself sufficient for socially responsible community engagement, nor do we claim that transparent labor documentation will be straightforward or always feasible. Labor dynamics must be jointly interrogated alongside issues of epistemic extraction [51], affective burden [25], colonial histories [15], and systemic discrimination [36]. What corporations ultimately do with the information gleaned from participants is as important as the conditions and compensation under which that information was given. Centering labor does not imply that achieving fair wages for research participation is enough to redress historical and systemic harm, nor is it enough to insulate research from "participation washing" entirely. Rather, as we illustrate in our participatory documentation schema, a labor conscious orientation to participation cultivates transparency in processes of value creation which open opportunities for collective bargaining over existing terms of work and conceptions of value. Recognizing participation as labor, in synthesis with other strategies of critical participatory approaches, is a first step in acknowledging and resisting corporate capture.

8 CONCLUSION

Our work responds to growing corporate interest in participatory approaches within FAccT and HCI communities as a means to facilitate research on the social impact of emerging (and existing) computational systems. This paper presents insights from a case study of the Responsible and Inclusive Technology Participatory Initiative, an effort within a large technology company to mobilize participatory methods towards these same ends—and situates the initiative within a broader industry environment in which the instrumentalization and commodification of inclusion risk co-opting participation at the expense of communities affected by technology-mediated harms.

The RITPI project illustrated how realities about the corporate gains of predatory inclusion makes an attentiveness to participant labor—especially that which has passed beneath our field of vision as hidden labor—central to equity and justice-oriented participatory projects. We highlight that labor dynamics between researchers and participants remain under-theorized in both critical approaches to participatory practice and the existing scholarship on fairness, accountability, and transparency. While others before us have proposed frameworks to explore equally important dimensions of the researcher-community relationship [8, 11, 36, 41, 51], these dimensions must also be accompanied by a critical interrogation of these collaborations as a form of work. Per our experience with the RITPI project, documenting and negotiating the labor dynamics at work within participatory projects serves to surface the often extractive terms of value production—where value is defined in advance, and opportunities for refusal are few. We suggest that mitigating corporate capture therefore requires that we orient ourselves towards labor transparency in our community work.

To forward more labor-sensitive approaches to participation, we proposed a series of provocations that seek to sensitize its interlocutors to the need to view labor relationships within research as explicit design choices. We also contributed a documentation

schema for documenting divisions of labor within impact research, designed around empowering collective action among participants to effect material change to research, design, and data processes. These contributions are a first step towards aligning the methodological decisions within our participatory research, design, and data practices with the institutional realities that condition normative values like fairness, accountability, and transparency.

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