

Cow-Cam.tv: An experiment on Slow Technology

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ABSTRACT

This position paper showcases the authors' views on Slow Technology as formed through several research and design experiments carried out in personal practice and at Distance Lab between 2008-2010. We focus on **cow-cam.tv**, a web experience created in 2009, and feedback provided by its viewers, to illustrate the impact of Slow Technology.

Author Keywords

Slow Technology, critical design, closed-circuit television

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

In western culture, the word "slow" does not always hold positive connotations. But as a reaction to "fast", the Slow Food movement (<http://www.slowfood.com>) has been growing steadily since its inception in 1986 and has been embedding its values in different aspects of modern life, including cities, management, blogging and travel to name just a few. What they all have in common is an emphasis on principles like quality, locality, and humanity.

In 2008, interactions with the International Cittaslow Association (<http://www.cittaslow.org>), the Slow Cities movement, revealed that although the directors were searching for new environmentally friendly technologies and online tools that could allow member-cities to develop collaborations and exchange experiences, many members considered technology, in a general sense, a necessary evil.

On the other hand, a search and analysis of public status updates on Twitter, a booming social media platform, between November 2008 and June 2009 containing the words 'slow' and 'technology' simultaneously, revealed that 40% of the total 1564 updates describe a user frustrated with the slow response of his/her technological equipment. Just 2% of these search results had relevance to the theme of Slow Technology as described in this paper.

The above findings suggest the public may view "slow technology" predominately as an oxymoron, unable of existing. However, merging the best elements of 'slow' and 'technology' could produce a new philosophical approach for the development of innovative technological applications. In that sense, Slow Technology, defined as a merging of ideas and values from the Slow Food movement into the creation of new technologies, can serve as a map

for how technology can be fluidly designed into our everyday lives, understanding what place it has and how it can exist on a par with nature's rhythms and sync with a human's five senses. In this framework, technology respects and borrows from the best of our past and re-appropriates it for the future, bringing us closer to our familiar and natural biological, physical, and social origins. It explores what makes us social animals and supports communities questioning the dogma of 'quantity over quality', 'global over local' and 'virtual over physical'. More abstractly, it explores the space between the values 0 and 1 of the binary numeral system. The outcomes include novel experiences using already available technologies and materials in an alternative manner, promoting lateral thinking, reflection and the user's immersion in a narrative.

Within this definition, design holds an important role as a tool for creative and informed decision-making in the development of a 'slow technology', balancing, adhering and blending the two opposing cultures.

COW-CAM.TV: THE EXPERIMENT

During our experience at Distance Lab in the Highlands of Scotland, the development of the '**neuromantic**' project consisted of several experimentations on Slow Technology that aimed at reinforcing and encouraging rural modern life through the use of new media technologies. One of the early focus areas was organic food production in a remote area, namely the town of Forres, Scotland. Research involving a local chef and an organic vegetable producer highlighted the dependence of quality of food and ingredients on the quality of the soil used to produce them in. This initial exploration led to further works on the theme of agriculture and the natural environment.

Among the prototypes and scenarios developed for the project was the web experience www.cow-cam.tv. Using Grace, a 14-year-old Highland cow, as an agent, video footage of 2 different custom-built camera setups was obtained from her viewpoint, one on the head and the other on the back transmitting wirelessly.



Figure 1. Poster describing the Cow-Cam.tv experiment

The recorded footage was shared with the public online, under a creative commons license while a future version could offer live Internet video streaming.

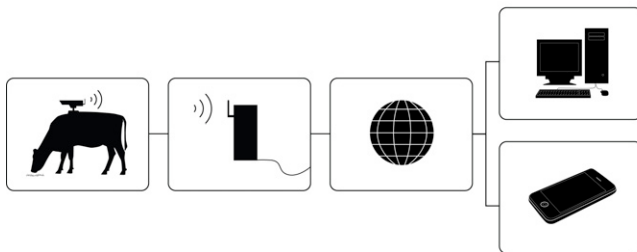


Figure 2. Graphic representation of system.

Publicity material accompanying the site was made to resemble closed-circuit television (CCTV) norms, with the difference that in cow-cam.tv everyone had access to its footage but nobody had control over where the camera was pointed except Grace. The intention was to liberate the viewer from the need of control and allow him/her to be immersed in the experience of the natural surroundings.



Figure 3. Wireless back-mounted custom built camera on Grace, the Highland cow.



Figure 4. Head mounted camera.

A form on the website allowed visitors to provide feedback and thoughts on the hosted videos and images, while social media were used to promote the site. One of the main patterns arising from comments left by visitors was empathy with the animal and surrounding nature. Messages such as “why would you kill such a beautiful animal?”, “you make me miss the countryside”, “I love the cow-cam, it is so relaxing” and “I’m going to get rid of the television!” suggested that cow-cam.tv made room for contemplation and reflection on one’s urban routine and facilitated a reconnection to something of value that was perhaps forgotten. Calling attention to our society’s obsession with surveillance, some visitors wondered if using a “friendlier” type of CCTV, such as this, could be an option in cities. However, some visitors did not appreciate the offered experience, calling for more action in the footage. An established UK-based advertising agency was envisioning the use of cow-cam.tv footage for an online campaign for one of its clients with the addition of dialogues between the animals portrayed.



Figure 5. Recorded footage from the back mounted camera.

CONCLUSIONS

Cow-cam.tv as an experiment, highlights the timeliness of the discussion on Slow Technology and the desire of many technology users to connect in their daily lives with a slow haven, which alludes to the trend of escapism one can find in metropolitan areas. It indicates a need for developing more applications that reconnect us to our roots in the real natural environment and not merely graphic and simulated impressions of it. Additionally, it illustrates how ‘slow’ is a state of mind with beneficial effects, which design can help to induce.