
Tech Worker-Cooperatives as Prefigurative Intersectional Feminism

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Abstract

In this workshop position paper, we argue that worker cooperatives function as prefigurative workplaces that are critical in building just technologies today. We contribute an overview of worker-cooperatives and offer two themes from our experience: emotional labor and disability in the workplace. We argue that in order to create just technologies, a just workplace that incorporates intersectional feminist values is critical.

Author Keywords

Worker-Cooperatives; Socio-technical systems, Intersectional Feminism; Emotional Labor; Disability

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction

Many information communication technologies have failed to design for the lived experiences of those who experience intersectional oppression. For example, social media platforms have failed to mitigate extreme harassment especially towards trans people and women of color [6]; the sharing economy has been co-opted by corporations that have dwindled labor rights while simultaneously developing technologies that replace the workers that support them [1]. When we imagine an

intersectional feminist future, we believe that in order for technologies to be just, they should be created by and with the communities they will affect. Tech worker cooperatives, as long as they are grounded in intersectional feminist values, offer one example of a future that promises to create the conditions necessary to produce more just technologies.

What is a Worker Cooperative?

As the name suggests, a worker cooperative defines an association of workers who come together as equal owners of their own means of production and products of labor. According to the International Cooperative Alliance, a coop is an “autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” As an affiliation of individuals, co-ops typically emerge in response to socioeconomic inequities, as well as work precariousness and exploitation in the late capitalist workplace.

In the spirit of such aspirations, Sassafras Tech Collective, the tech coop of which, we, the authors, are members, is founded on an intersectional feminist approach to social justice, with members working actively to understand and dismantle axes of oppression such as racism, sexism, and transphobia. Tech co-ops are particularly necessary as alternatives to the discriminatory and male-dominated environment in the tech industry. We believe that just technologies can only be designed and built in a just working place and we see tech collectives as playing an important role in current conversations about just and inclusive technologies.

Not surprisingly, co-ops share a legacy of struggle for social justice and equality. They developed first in poor, immigrant, and underserved communities. As far back as

the 1800s, Black communes and collectives were integral to the abolitionist struggle. One example is the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in western Massachusetts, a commune of 200 people, of which Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass were members [3]. The late 19th and early 20th century saw the burgeoning of a variety of Black mutual-aid agencies and Black collectives in response to the economic marginalization and oppression of African Americans. African Americans came together to till small plots of land, buy their freedom, and create mutual aid agencies for the sick, orphans, and widows [3].

Mindful of this history, we describe the intellectual, physical, and emotional labor that underpins the ongoing process of building a tech collective. We understand the co-op building process as an ethics of being in the world with and for one another and as a space that we can use to reflect on our privileges and oppressions, dream out new futures, and try out alternatives. In so far as being part of a co-op means reflecting on our own complicity with power, it is also a process fraught with tensions, but it is at the same time, a feminist anti-oppressive labor of individual and collective care and love.

Sassafras Tech Collective

Sassafras Tech Collective is a worker-owned cooperative formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2012 and officially incorporated as a cooperative in 2014. Sassafras is a tech research, design, and development consultancy, developing mobile and web applications for activists, researchers, and non-profits [4]. At the time of writing, Sassafras is comprised of six full worker-owners and one prospective member. Sassafras is about 70% women, a huge accomplishment for any technical company. We are comprised of just 14%

people of color, a number we all would like to increase and for which we are actively dedicating resources. The only official hierarchy we have is between members (who are owners of the co-op) and prospective members (those who are officially employees and en route to becoming a full member after 6 months to a year.) Although unofficial hierarchy or soft power is always present, we actively work to mitigate this hierarchy. That is, we are deeply aware of the “tyranny of structurelessness” and how oppression arises in cooperatives [7]. We currently make decisions by consensus and are members of the larger US Federation of Worker Cooperatives.

Inspired by other worker cooperatives that gather at the Allied Media Conference in Detroit and the worker-coop movement in the global south, Jill Dimond and Thomas Smyth were interested in creating a prefigurative intersectional feminist workplace structure in which technologies were created. By prefigurative, we mean an orientation towards creating a “new society in the shell of the old.” Prefigurative politics aim to embody the values into current structures that they believe the future should hold [2]. In other words, the way in which a project or organization is created is just as important as the ends. Thus, at Sassafras, we aim to create an example of how we believe workplaces should exist. Sassafras strives to be an intersectional feminist workplace as reflected in its vision statement that explicitly names intersectional oppressions while also recognizing that oppressions can arise in non-hierarchical settings. During Sassafras’s existence, members have taken notes on lessons and reflections using an auto-ethnographic method. The following are some preliminary themes that present both promises

and challenges for worker cooperatives and their impact on technology.

Emotional Labor

In traditional hierarchical workplaces, there is often unaccounted unpaid labor that goes into maintaining relationships, navigating conflict, sustaining workplace culture, and attending to practical needs such as coffee, snacks, cleaning, and note-taking. This labor is often relegated to women, and especially women of color [5]. At Sassafras, as an intersectional feminist workplace, we recognize this fact and work to distribute this particular kind of labor. All internal work, including work that falls under emotional labor categories is compensated at the same rate as client work. For our meetings, we rotate who takes notes and who facilitates, ensuring a fairer distribution of labor. Similarly, we also rotate who is in charge of our weekly social events. We have had a conversation about who would clean the office and we decided to hire out the work due to financial reasons, but also because we felt that the responsibility would fall on women in the office.

Sassafras has several documents with which members and prospective members agree to comply. One of these documents is a “Code of Conduct” [8] wherein one of the items states: “Make your concerns known.” At Sassafras we expect conflict to happen and we expect to resolve it to the best of our abilities, and, when not possible, to seek outside counseling and help. Unlike traditional workplaces where one is expected to hold in grievances towards managers under the threat of being fired, Sassafras is a workplace where we all hold each other accountable for working out conflict. We have an officer role of “mediator” who helps with

situations where someone needs some help navigating conflict. We additionally track this type of time under an “Emotional Labor” category.

As a result, we believe that there is more open conflict and more emotions than in a traditional workplace. A challenge in this type of workplace is getting more comfortable with conflict, and viewing it as healthy rather than as shameful or harmful (and having ground rules about what healthy conflict looks like for us.) Moreover, healthy conflict resolution requires a greater amount of emotional intelligence and communication skills. However, we view conflict as opportunity for growth—both to resolve the issue at hand, but also to develop our conflict resolution and emotional skills. We apply these emotional skills to our technical work, such as providing more just code reviews and mentoring. We believe these skills are critical to undoing oppression within ourselves and our own communities.

Disability in the Workplace

At Sassafras, we are striving to build a workplace that supports people with disabilities. One of the ways that we do this is supporting remote work with an orientation towards supporting disability. One of our members works entirely remotely while two others work remotely part time. We believe that building a remote work culture is critical to support those with chronic illness who may not have the ability to come into the office every day. We have designated “tea times” and “Sassy hours”, where remote workers hang out together with those in the office via video chat and use tools such as Slack to communicate and hang out. This social time is compensated. Sassafras also has monthly social justice reading groups that help us advance our understanding of oppression. We also offer

generous health plans and paid time off. Sassafras is flexible in terms of the number of hours worked and when. This is important for those with chronic illness, as they have to work around when the illness may flair up. We are paid hourly and do not have salaries because we find salary would give those with part time needs less flexibility. In our bylaws, we require a minimum of 15 billable hours a week. However, because Sassafras covers full health benefits and paid time off for part time workers, we need to be cognizant of how many billable hours we need in order to support everyone.

A challenge in supporting flexible work is accountability and balancing the needs of those who require accommodations and those who do not. A big risk that people in non-profits or activist work encounter is burnout and martyrdom, where people feel like they have to give more than they are able in order to help people in need. As a result, they cannot continue working at the rate they felt they must. We are not alone in this challenge, and are actively working on it in order to spread out the burden. We are looking into hour budgets and holding ourselves accountable for meeting those goals together.

Conclusion

In this short position paper, we offer a glance at our activism in practice: creating a prefigurative intersectional feminist technical workplace. We have highlighted two themes, emotional labor and disability in the workplace that illustrate how we, at Sassafras, grapple with intersectional feminist issues every day. We believe that creating different workplace structures are critical in order to offer alternatives in times of neoliberalism breakdown and oppression within

technological fields. We also believe that because of our consideration of oppression internally in our workplace, we produce better and more just technologies.

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