



The power of an intimate voice

A manifesto by Hanna van Rixtel
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At Eindhoven University of Technology

The power of an intimate voice

"Your silence will not protect you"
quoting Audre Lorde [3],
but thinking
your voice will also not protect you.

Wondering if the systems keep the secrets of words
as everyone and everything
could then hear your spoken verbs.

What is said today
is set forever
losing the temporality of expression
and gaining the fixation of responsibility.

What is good today
can be wrong tomorrow
knowing the risks of interpretations
and fearing the looming consequences.

Forcing a scream transforming to a whisper
where a new wave of silence arises
a wave that needs to be manipulated.

By creating a vacuum for our sounds
where the wavelength can be in phase
and expressions no longer will be silenced.

The beauty of the sound of our voices
deserves an intimacy
where the words can flourish
and the power is cherished
keeping the secrets of our words.

It is our power.
The power of the sound of our voices.

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My vision

Data is playing an increasingly important role in products and systems, allowing us to enjoy personalized and connected experiences. I believe this brings critical situations: we are often no longer in control, as systems begin to push our boundaries, they begin to steer us in directions, influence our choices and invade our privacy. It makes me angry that these things create a complexity, where we have difficulty to unravel it. I believe it should not even be a question if systems really work for us and not secretly, behind our back, against us.

This critical view on technology is reflected in my everyday life. I feel the urge to deliberately consider the data I produce, but I notice how hard this sometimes is. Having troubles with declining cookies or not knowing if your phone is listening all the time, are just two daily thoughts going through my mind. What do they know about me, where does it go, who knows it, for how long it stays there, can I delete or change it, what does it tell about me... Questions that I will never be able to answer completely.

This brought me to the belief that my role as a designer is to dismantle these complexities to ensure that people can still be in charge of their own lives and the technology in them. We should keep the technologies humane according to our values. But I also feel that we as a society should get our strength together and start a social movement to manipulate the systems, provoke radical change ourselves instead of waiting for others. Which all starts by creating awareness, where my manifesto *The Power of an Intimate Voice* starts to play a role. I feel the urge to spread this message, inviting people to protect the power of the sound of their voices.

Unpacking the manifesto

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When I read Audre Lorde's manifesto on how your silence will not protect you, I couldn't agree more [3]. I believe we need to take ownership and responsibility for dilemmas and conflicts in our lives by expressing our feelings and thoughts to provoke change. But it brings with it a vulnerability, a vulnerability I am struggling with these days.

My insecurity is triggered by my extreme awareness of privacy violations happening around me because of the rising amount of smart products and systems. The systems and the people behind the systems will always know what I have said, but not always protect these words, keeping them safe. This causes a moral conflict in my mind: I want to speak up, but I know that my words are not safe, resulting in a conflict where I can not do both [4].

Once your words are out there, whether consciously by putting them on the internet or unconsciously by systems that collect data, they stay there for a while. You wonder where it goes, who can see it and how long it stays there. Knowing that this data is forever linked to you means you remain accountable for your words forever. This demands for a responsibility to take care of your expressions as they are fixed, and no longer temporary.

A context, values or beliefs may be changed, but the words remain the same. The norms about what is right or wrong to speak out loud will grow with the change. Which at some point, others around you or even yourself will no longer support your thoughts. Since you are not there to explain this, the free space for interpretations will only increase. Knowing that this can have consequences, but feeling that there is nothing you can do to change it.

The moral conflict in our environment of speaking, forces us to deliberately consider every sentence, word or even letter that we say. This takes away the strength and essence of our speaking like Audre Lorde explains it [3]. I start to feel silenced, but also feel like we can do something about it, as it is our power. Like Lee et al researched, we could punish the systems that are misusing the secrets of our words [1]. But then we would always rely on the response, so I want to manipulate it myself and regain the ownership of my words.

Instead of screaming everything everywhere, we need to create a consciously chosen/created space that we can trust. It would be an environment where you can share with respect. Being able to share voices with each other, but in a way it brings strength together and does not take anything down.

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We should embrace our voice and give it what it needs, intimacy. Feeling connections between our words, tone and meanings. A closeness that allows for trust and respect, and not for a fear of losing control over words. A place where we can speak up to make a difference and not implying an agreement, provoking a change. It is a form of caring for the sounds of our voices, where care ethics support the emotions of our voices and where the relationships between voices will improve [2].

Sharing your feelings and thoughts, becomes strong when it is heard and understood, creating the power of the sound of our voices.

Discussion

My manifesto stems from a lack of trust in technology and a trust in people, which is critically debatable. Because why do I trust people more than technology? People can also remember everything you say, interpret it differently, have an opinion or start gossiping about it. Isn't technology also human because it is made by people? So why can't I trust them? But do I know who these people are and what their values are? I believe every individual can have a different answer to these questions, there is no right or wrong. This manifesto represents my voice and my beliefs. I trust talking to people more, because I usually know who I am talking to, if I can trust them. They can respond immediately and I can go back to my words. People have a flexibility that technology does not have because it is a structured tool that just follows algorithms and rules.

I provoke a manipulation of the new wave of silence that is caused by systems and companies behind the systems. When critically reflecting on this way of manipulation, I start wondering if this will let the responsibility gap grow [1]? If we work around the systems, no one will be accountable for the flaws in the systems, which might even increase because the systems have to listen harder to hear things. On the other hand, I hope companies will start thinking about the value of data if less data is generated, open the conversation and look for new ways to do it. I can be a silent social movement with a big impact. My manifesto aims for this by creating awareness and inviting people to start thinking about it.

The manifesto is written from a personal perspective, but can also be translated to my professional perspective as a designer. My manifesto regarding design involves safeguarding these human values of privacy to protect the power of the sound of our voices. On the one hand, as explained earlier, I can help to let the responsibility gap shrink and ensure that the cause of this new wave of silence disappears. But since this is a difficult task associated with many stakeholders and values, I need to create free space for the user to grow, give time to think, understand what is happening and use a system in a personally desired way. This design perspective allows me to express my voice in my designs.

Reflection on presentation



I let my voice speak through my manifesto in an intimate performance. I created this intimate space through a piano song, with my words flowing on the waves of sound, calling attention to my performance. I stood under an umbrella to which scarves were attached. I started with my face visible to the audience, but then turned the scarves so that they covered my face to protect myself with an intimate enclosed space.

After the performance, there was room for discussion with the audience. A first point of reflection was what exactly the new wave of silence means, which I have already addressed earlier in this report, but which I will summarize again because it is at the heart of my feelings. The new wave of silence is caused by the complexity of the data being generated, fixing the things we say and making them audible to everyone and everything. It means we have to consciously think about every verb, which creates a form of silence as our right to speak freely loses its power. We are forced to stop shouting everything we think and replace it with correctly chosen words.

It was also questioned what the difference between words and the sound of the voice is. I think the sound of our voice determines how you mean certain words, the tone of voice can make a big difference, but personal backgrounds or values can also be reflected in the sound. Words, on the other hand, can be very abstract, leaving room for interpretations. It is a difference between being heard and being understood.

Looking at the other manifestos presented, I was struck by the importance of a strong call to action. My call is to manipulate the new wave of silence, which I believe must be done by creating an intimate space for our voices. Looking critically at my words, I could have explained in more detail how to do this. On the other hand, I deliberately left this open, because I believe that what exactly constitutes an intimate space is very personal. I believe our strength is to find this space ourselves, to do it differently each time depending on the context, to let it happen spontaneously, to listen to your feelings. Take ownership.

References

- [1] Lee, M., Ruitjen, P., Frank, L., de Kort, Y., & IJsselsteijn, W. (2021, May). People may punish, not blame, robots.
- [2] Ley, M. (2023). Care Ethics and the Future of Work: a Different Voice. *Philosophy & Technology*, 36(1), 7.
- [3] Lorde, A. (2017). *Your silence will not protect you*. Silver Press
- [4] Tessman, L. (2017). *When doing the right thing is impossible*. Oxford University Press.