On Accountable Objects: Designing and Deploying Accountability Tools for Charities

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# Abstract

Charities, Non-Profits, and other Third Sector Organisations are important elements of our civic society; operating in areas where the government (both Local and Central) have either under-served or are not trusted to operate. They are often funded through combinations of private or public grants and have legal protections excusing them from tax obligations. Due to their tendency to work with vulnerable and marginalised groups, and their financial status they are often required to be ‘Transparent and Accountable’ in both their work and spending.

This thesis presents a workplace study account of over three years’ embedded research within a charitable organisation in North East England, with details of additional engagements with other charity sector actors. In the thesis, I outline how ‘Transparency and Accountability’ are accomplished in everyday work practice and I chronicle a design process leading to the development of novel, inter-operable, accountability tools within this setting. These tools were trialled across two charities and then discussed with key financial stakeholders to critically evaluate their efficacy. I then present further implications for designing for ‘Transparency and Accountability’ in charities.

I provide the following contributions. Firstly; an understanding of ‘Accountability Work’ in workplace practice and design requirements for digital systems in these environments. Secondly, a model for the structured representation of everyday charity activities, first as the *Qualitative Accounting Data Standard* and then, through the implications of its deployment, in modelling commitments and actions. Thirdly; a set of design requirements for systems and interfaces to support the collection and curation of, and interactions with, this data in charities. Finally, I present *Vanguard Design* as an implementation and critique of participatory design principles in the environment of small front-line charities and contribute lessons for Digital Civics researchers in these contexts.

# Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Andi, Carl, Dean, Lynne, Mick, Owen, Sonia, Sydney, and the young people of the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne.

In loving memory of Mick, who did so much for so many and asked for so little in return.

*Deyr fé* *deyja frændr* *deyr sjálfr it sama* *en orðstírr* *deyr aldregi* *hveim er sér góðan getr*

*Deyr fé* *deyja frændr* *deyr sjálfr it sama* *ek veit einn* *at aldri deyr* *dómr um dauðan hvern*

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