



## Letter from the Editors

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## **Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Research-Creation**

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Welcome to the second edition of *Wi: the journal of the Mobile  
Digital Commons Network*.

The articles included in this issue address the theme of collaboration in the context of research-creation. Many large research networks involve inter-disciplinary collaborations between researchers trained in different fields: computer science, engineering, fine arts, design, humanities, and the social sciences. In the context of the MDCN, these fields bring practitioners with different forms of expertise to the production process. Too often, the setting up of an inter-disciplinary research team is seen as the assembly of a grocery-list of knowledge. It is not. The process of meaningful collaboration for the purposes of research-creation is an always complex – sometimes frustrating – potentially rewarding experience.

For those involved in content development for mobile technologies, the challenges of setting up productive exchanges, which are at the heart of collaboration, are manifold. There are issues of language: a signal from an engineer may not mean the same thing to someone trained in communications. There are issues of process and practice: designers may work from the perspective of aesthetics

and social scientists from the position of the imagined user. We may have discovered that we often have different modes of problem solving: the engineers tend to like a problem to be named with precision, while as artists we have tended to work more intuitively and para-tactically through continual trial and error that can frustrate and aggravate our engineers. We have different modes of drafting and crafting ideas: some work with textual descriptions, others with drawings, still others with mathematical textual specifications. Throughout this project, we have learned from the points where we diverge in methodologies and practices. We have embraced where and when we converge. We have learned to adapt and to listen to each other in ways that we never knew would be necessary.

All collaboration involves bringing together the dynamic energies of individuals into an environment where what is produced, collectively, is more than any one person can achieve alone. Collaboration involves, at times, putting one's ego and self interest aside and a respect for process. While most who enter into research-collaborations have the best of intentions, power difference and dynamics may arise and a skillful negotiation of both inter-personal and systemic imbalances is oft-times needed to inspire the team to work and to keep a project moving.

With this in mind, we open the issue with a set of "rules" on collaboration written by Yasmin Jiwani. While Dr. Jiwani is not a member of the MDCN, many of us have benefited from informal conversations with her. Her rules are a series of reflections devised from her vast and many years of experience in a variety of collaborative ventures, most notably her research on anti-racism and her feminist investigations on violence against women and

children. Her intention, in drafting her experience into rules, is not to impose a set of conditions for research collaboration. It is to draw attention, in advance, to what may go wrong and thereby mitigate the potential damage that can occur in a collaborative process.

Our intention in opening with her work is to underscore the need for such a reflection in an era of large research teams and networks. Assembling a team is not only a matter of finding the right expertise, but building trust and respect. Dr. Jiwani offers some practical guidance on how this may be achieved.

The articles that follow Yasmin Jiwani's rules describe and analyze some of the collaborative experiences occurring within the context of the MDCN. Alison Powell describes with refreshing honesty her field-work with Île Sans Fil, one of our network partners. Presented as a series of field notes, Powell brings us into her research universe and into the struggles of community WiFi activism.

Andrea Zeffiro's piece "Daviid Gauthier: A Portrait of the Engineer as Architect of Information" is an edited interview with Gauthier, who has played a pivotal role in the development of the MEE (Mobile Experience Engine) for the MDCN. In this exchange, Gauthier reflects on how engineers and artists can conspire to produce software tools for artists, designers and other cultural workers so that they may create their own mobile content.

Intermingled in the interview are Zeffiro's simple and clear definitions of the technological language used in the interview. These explanations perform important translation work, which is imperative for collaborative research in mobile technologies. Developing a common language can be a wall or a stepping-stone

for creating shared understandings of the technologies at play in the context of research-creation.

This is followed by our own ruminations on the contributions of artist Marit-Saskia Wahrendorf. A selection of Wahrendorf's designs for cell phone peripherals, which we call Cell Skins, were curated by *wi*-editor, Barbara Crow, who subsequently interviewed Marit about these pieces. A true collaborative effort, the audio interview was edited by *Wi*'s very own Neil Barratt. The interview is supplemented by a co-authored text in which Sawchuk and Crow delve into the haptic, sensual aesthetics of Wahrendorf's fabric work.

In Michael Longford's paper "Territory as Interface: Design for Mobile Experiences" the place of collaboration may not seem obvious at first glance. However, his thoughts on "Urban Archaeology: Sampling the Park" and "The Haunting" suggest that collaboration is not only occurring amongst members of a design team from different disciplines. In the context of locative media the very territory that is engaged with is, as Bruno LaTour might describe it, very much an active agent (or actant) in the design process.

Finally, Janice Leung's review of La Nuit Blanche discusses how curators of location-based digital art events, such as this one, harness virtual space to create a meta-level of engagement with an exhibition. For Leung, of equal interest, is the way that spectators and participants used their digital cameras to create another space of social interaction and experience-sharing parallel to the official site. These short essays, reviews, and interviews reveal and untangle some of the challenges that language, problem solving strategies and creative practices and processes that individuals and

their disciplinary training bring to large-scale, inter-disciplinary projects. The writing and works presented in this issue are a reminder that reflection, respect, reciprocity, and trust are primordial in collaborative research projects. They indicate how research collaboration may benefit from a more overt invocation of unspoken practices, behaviours and assumptions.

Finally, please be advised that two of our editors and production aficionados, Neil Barratt and Janice Leung, have introduced a new feature. You can now subscribe to a newsletter alerting you to *Wi* updates. Barbara Crow and Kim Sawchuk Editors Toronto, Ontario; Montréal, Québec

## **Biography**

**Barbara Crow** is the incoming director of the graduate program in Communication and Culture at York University. Current research projects include: Digital Cities, focusing on the relationship between digital technology and multimedia cities; Canadian Sexual Assault Law and Contested Boundaries of Consent: Legal and Extra-Legal Dimensions (with Lise Gotell), investigating women's organizations and legal discourses; the Mobile Digital Commons Network, exploring relations of mobile technologies and cultural production; and most recently, CWIRP exploring wifi as public infrastructure. She was president of the Canadian Women's Studies Association, 2002-2004.

**Kim Sawchuk** is the current editor of the *Canadian Journal of Communications*. Her research involves the close study of the relationship between embodiment, social practice and discourses on technology. Kim has an unusual passion for methodology, particularly qualitative methods. She has been experimenting with

the potential of open source software and multimedia tools for collaborative research and developing research protocols and processes for better understanding how to enhance user participation with locative media projects. *When Pain Strikes* (1999), with co-editors Cathy Busby and Bill Burns) and *Wild Science: Reading Feminism, Medicine, and the Media* (2000), co-edited with Janine Marchessault are but two of Kim's many publications.