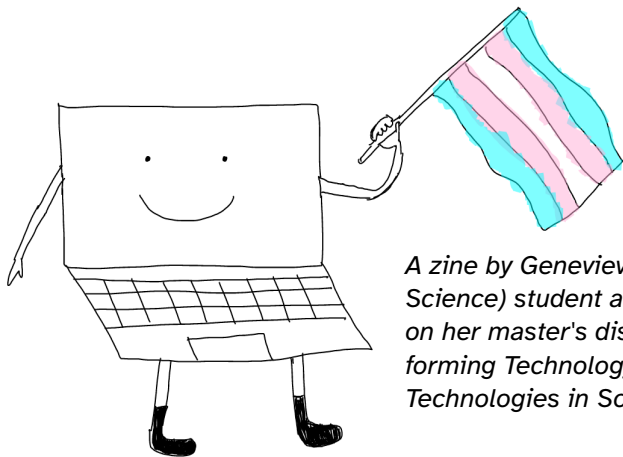# Building queer technology counterpublics:
The case of the Trans Tech Tent

A zine by Genevieve Clifford, a PhD (Computer Science) student at Swansea University, based on her master's dissertation project "Trans-forming Technology: Exploring Transgender Technologies in South Wales"

What is this?

In Summer 2023 I did a research project with the wonderful folks who use and run Trans Tech Tent (T3), I wanted to explore the tech needs of the Welsh trans community, and how non-profits (like T3) address digital divides in our community. I did this by undertaking "semi-structured" interviews (Whiting 2008) with 3 service users, and 2 practitioners (the people who run T3) and then using a method called "reflexive thematic analysis" (Braun and Clarke 2022; Byrne 2022) to help me discover themes in the transcripts I collected. This zine is based on the dissertation I wrote, and is a succinct summary of the background and findings from it. This project could not have happened without the collaboration of folks in T3, and I am immensely greatful for all of your help! This zine belongs to my trans siblings across Wales, thank you trusting me with this project, and thanks for making me feel so at home!

Who are Trans Tech Tent?

Trans Tech Tent (T3) are a community organisation that provide tech repair and teaching for trans people (like me and possibly you)! They're based in Cardiff but support people across Wales and the rest of the world over the web. They have 5 directors, ~6 volunteers, and have fixed 60 items (as of September 2023).

What kind of repair work?

Broken phone screens, laptops, desktop computers, they've even fixed a car! At present this is about 1 item / week, and on average are repaired in 2 weeks; devices are sent to volunteers across Cardiff and the Valleys to be repaired, or are done in "the data den" (P5, 01:13:15) - one of the director's homes. Loans of devices can be given out while folks wait, and repairs of up to £100 are covered. T3 also has provision for digital forensics and data recovery. Cardiff's Queer Emporium is used as a staging point for logistics (pick-up / drop-off).

What sort of teaching?

I break this down into two types: formal and informal. Formally, they've run sessions at B/Sides Cymru (a tech conference in Cardiff), and have invited their own members to participate. Informally, there's a lot of informal provision of teaching through T3's Discord server: ask questions about tech, and you'll usually get help!

What impact has this had?

Repair and teaching have had direct impacts on service users' lives, allowing them to continue to access employment and education: Participant 2 had a laptop loan that "managed to run InDesign just enough for me to do an important project" (01:08:39); charging at-cost for repair allowed Participant 3 to "continue working" (01:02:28) when they were concerned that they would have been overcharged by someone with the limited money they had from their university's COVID grant. On precarity, participants also spoke about the importance of access to technology when accessing state benefits, with benefits like Universal Credit requiring recipients to submit

requests via the internet, including communications with work coaches (in the case of unemployment). It is not just access to employment, education, or means of financial support that is facilitated through technology, but also access to community. I frame this in the context of queer "counterpublics" (Warner 2002) and especially those that are online (Cavalcante 2016; Jenzen 2017); the formation of spaces that run in contrast to a dominant (cissexist and heteronormative) public. T3's focus on supporting the trans community has created spaces for knowledge sharing that are accessible and not gatekept by "cis [men] in a way that's going to be demoralising" (P3, 00:20:29). Similarly, T3's Discord server has had a role in developing a community not just for knowledge transfer where people feel comfortable "[coming] back to [T3] for extra help on how to do software stuff" but also a community where "any young professional could step in… and feel at home and welcome" (P5, 01:15:56), and especially so in a space that takes a hard-line stance on tackling transmisogyny (P1, 00:28:47). This has had positive impacts for community members, for example Participant 1 remarked that T3's social side has meant she feels more connected to her local community, has made her feel less isolated, alongside improving her access to technology (01:19:41).

What's next?

A strong theme throughout was precarity in finances, not just for service users (as discussed), but also for T3. As a community group, it is reliant on donations from those in / near to {the} Welsh trans communit{y; ies} (i.e., through Open Collective), and especially from its practitioners and directors. I find this is best described by P5: "we have never had four figures in our bank account ever… I pour in hundreds personally to keep this thing running… we can't afford to pay anyone… we do our best and a lot of the time that means the trans community is paying to save itself" (01:19:51). Part of the problem in accessing wider funding is both a lack of "capacity" for grant writing (P4, 00:26:43) compounded by a lack of evidence in the efficacy of groups like T3, and wider understandings of trans digital poverty (as I found from my literature review, and highlighted by participants). Further funding would help provide much needed "employment opportunities for people" in creating "formal employment" beyond volunteering (P5, 01:19:51).

Funding may also provide opportunities for geographical expansion within Wales, as well as for further training of practitioners.

Though I have discussed the positives of the positives of the digital counterpublic that T3's Discord provides, there are a number of service users that don't use Discord, reducing their lack of access to both community, and the informal pedagogy that takes place there. For example: Participant 3 had discussed that it would be nice to have an informal place to find tech assistance, but was unaware that provision of this was available over Discord.

References

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Interested in this kind of work?

PhD Overview

Advisory Network Launch

Great to hear it! At present I'm doing my PhD project looking at digital poverty in the Welsh trans community; updates on this at: *https://mun-tonsi.net/phd* (left QR code). I'm currently looking to build an advisory network of orgs that support trans people in Wales, if you're interested in this, more info at: *https://mun-tonsi.net/advisory-network/launch* (right QR code).