

## CRAFTING COMPLAINTS AS CIVIC DUTY

**Jamie Ferguson & Daniel Wessolek**

This paper presents issues and ideas connected to the concept of complaining in general and the work of the Complaint Department specifically. Here we present two case study examples that illustrate the work and process involved, and explain why we think complaining can lead to a better world.



complaint department

*One variation of the Complaint Department logo, based on a set of tools from the Open Clip Art Library and the font Vollkorn by Friedrich Althausen. Copyright by the authors.*

Complaining as a means of expression should encourage the individual to acknowledge the seemingly inconsequential annoyances of everyday life as opportunities for discussion and participation. By encouraging the potential for engagement, awareness and conscious expression can be experienced as creativity and even denote performativity. It is our understanding that expression in this sense can also lead to self-worth, gratification, and even collective well-being. Studies show that emotions are as contagious as a virus. [1]

Inherent to being human, to complain was once seen as a powerful source for citizen definition and direction; to speak-up, to object and to protest was understood also as a reaction for something. The

Complaint Department recognizes the importance of a platform for complaining and sees this as a powerful means of expression and of citizen agency.

It's not polite to bitch, grumble or whine. To protest against something, which is how the term is now usually implied, is discouraged. The 'complainer' is typically depicted as self-interested, cantankerous, over-emotional, even anti-social. One might find little understanding in a pervasive market where the 'person as consumer' becomes an aggregated commodity item with little individuality. One's efforts seem lost in as many products and services and consumers out there as there are complaints to be made. Complaints are met often not without some sympathy but without agency. The current state of making a formal complaint seems curtailed to an industry operation, an endpoint having little palpable impact. Few bother, understandably, to invest the time or energy.

It is a highly valuable resource when an individual makes the decision to invest the effort and time involved in voicing an opinion. To formulate and describe an issue, to communicate this, to even go so far as to suggest a possible solution, is as close as one can get to genuine field research and user feedback. This information is a source for design strategy and conceptualizing futures. To mobilize the collective imagination, a complainer not as an anti-social but as participant for public good and improvement gives rise. Such direct and participatory methods for evaluating our present culture can lead to a better understanding of the underlying societal structures and patterns at work. A recognition of the current state of affairs can embed an appreciation for alternatives.

Complaining is at once a strategy and mode of intervention, a means to counter-act. By encouraging the expression of one's reactions to events or situations, the act of complaining can be reappropriated. The Complaint Department regards the ability of crafting complaints as a civic imperative for the public good, to which any small contribution is valuable. Enacting a call for change, choice, or accountability, citizen democracy can promote accessibility and transparency. By leveraging the freedom to disagree, those who are dishonest or do not act in favour of the public good can be discredited.

We see the Complaint Department as an ongoing art /design agency project with the goal of finding and communicating what we call improvables: design problems in everyday life that cause negative interruptions. The case study examples illustrated below present some of the issues the Complaint Department deals with. Instead of circulating negative emotions, we believe that 'room for improvement' is opened up through this approach.

Those familiar with BIXI [2] will recognize the public bicycle sharing system in Montreal that is growing in popularity. It is comparable to the Stockholm City Bikes or to Vélib' in Paris. The system is made up of bikes, bike docks, and pay stations powered by solar panels. It is an opportunity to evaluate different instances of public systems in various cities, and to think about their urban context and cultural variances. These systems have an impact on urban fabric to varying degrees and on different levels of discussion, as it seems many have an opinion or story to tell about their experience. Complaint Department is interested in how such systems can be embedded within seemingly very rigid infrastructures and how these implementations can alter one's experiences, whether this takes the form of added value and improvement to one's daily life or instead contribute stress and irritation.

In this case an attempt to rent two bicycles with one credit card failed. Normally, the casual user can purchase up to two 24h accesses on one credit card. After accessing the second bike, it was discovered that one was damaged, though no other bikes remained in the rack to choose from. The Customers biked to the next nearest stand and attempted to replace both bikes so they could begin their journey

again with equal time remaining on the trip. After replacing one bike, a second bike was no longer permitted. It appeared the number of bicycles allowed was limited to one after the first return. Were important instructions not followed or could one speculate that this scenario has been generally overlooked in the workings of the system? One might be satisfied with a reimbursement, but this is also an opportunity to enhance communication and/or usability of the system. The overall importance for continued evaluation of products in their environment over time, after they have been released into the market and have accumulated feedback, is integral.

This Customer requests a different flavoured yoghurt in his nearby grocery store. Stores of the same chain carry a variety, so he often goes to a different location in order to get what he wants. Upon request, the manager of the supermarket says he will try to fulfil the wish. After some time, Customer asks the shop manager about the result of his enquiry. The manager is very sorry, he has tried everything possible, but a store of this size is not able to fulfil this particular request due to decisions made by upper management of the chain. Customer is sceptical and decides to contact upper management directly. The representative of the chain is not aware of any such decisions, and strangely enough, some days later there are a variety of flavours available at the store. Interestingly, other suggestions made at the time of enquiry, for example, to keep discounted food that is close to the date of expiration separate from the fish section, have been implemented. Customer imagines that this follow-through might lead to a greater awareness for the value of consumer requests with a store manager, and in doing so has also improved business.

Corporate complaint departments still typically handle complaints as a problem, not as potential symptoms of a still improvable product or service. The focus lies mainly on the relationship with the customer and not losing them as a result of their complaint, instead of utilizing the complaint as resource. From our experience, complaints are a rich source for problem detection and voluntary insight that is generated by those confronted with an improvable. Complaint Department aims to detect and communicate these improvables, sometimes by describing the occurred, sometimes by coming up with design solutions.

### **References and Notes:**

[1] *Wired Online*, "Happiness and Sadness Spread Just Like Disease," July 14, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2010/07/contagious-emotions/> (accessed September 8, 2011).

[2] *Bixi Web Site*, <https://bixi.com/> (accessed August 18, 2011).