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A for Alternatives

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Abstract

This paper presents some thoughts about the role of participatory design, now and in the future, based on the Beck (2002). My main proposal is that research-based participatory design is needed to question technology and propose alternatives.

Keywords

Participatory design, research

Introduction

Every year when I teach my HCI class I meet students who totally take the Windows interface for granted – a computer has a mouse for pointing, a keyboard, overlapping windows, pull-(up or)down menus and a desktop. Obviously if you have never seen other kinds of interaction it is easy to take this interface style for granted, and not question the usefulness for particular purposes.

An office of the Danish state has recently presented a white paper on IT architecture where it is proposed that every single office in the public administration use the same platform and applications in order to have the administration go digital. The argument is that if they don't use the same platform, document exchange and integrated services will be very difficult One is very easily stuck with this way of thinking, and one may easily accept such a top-down approach if one doesn't know that alternatives exist. What happened to the particular needs of all the involved public offices and institutions? And even the demands from particular work tasks?

How do we know if there are alternatives? How do we know which solution is best for the particular situation? And what does 'best' mean?

A response to Beck

In the volume 14 of SJIS, Eevi Beck (2002) discusses where Scandinavian participatory design research is heading, and I fully agree with her analysis of the problems that we are facing. And I encourage everybody to face the challenges and seek new paths for participatory design. I would love to see more participatory design projects in the third world, or less resourceful groups in the western world. I believe as well that there are still many challenges in the more "classical" settings of Scandinavian participatory design and I will try to outline what role I see for this type of research at the present.

Questioning as an obligation for researchers

No public research institution has, or will ever have, the resources to put into technology development that large companies like Microsoft have. Hence, as researchers we have in general no chance of influencing technology by producing products to compete with these large companies.

Accordingly, I believe we must use our curiosity and creativity to question solutions that come out of such large development projects, and we must use the insight to help ordinary users raise similar questions to the specific technologies proposed to them. This is an agenda that has many levels – from questioning well-established human-computer interaction paradigms, via questioning IT strategies on a societal level, to helping users in particular organisations participate in technological development. The latter is what we often call participatory design, but I would claim that it does not come without the former.

"Use quality" matters

There are many ways in which we as researchers can continue to question established ways of doing things, hence supporting questioning and exploration of alternatives in design. At KTH, the ITQ project aims to work out ways of certifying production planning systems (http://cid.nada.kth.se/ao/ao_itq.html) for their innovative nature as regards support for helping users cooperative plan and develop their own work. The idea of influencing the development of technological alternatives through certification is not new. As a matter of fact many people way beyond the borders of Sweden use a TCO certified computer screen every day, probably without being aware that TCO is a Swedish Labour Union that decided to help provide better screen technology.

The ITQ project raises some rather interesting challenges of how to certify IT systems and their use. However, from the point of view of my argument here, the main point is to raise the fact that use quality matters in a context where most certification is about entirely different matters, and where use and the concern of users are most often neglected.

Hence what the researchers pose is an interesting challenge to makers of production planning systems of responding to questions about use quality.

Alternatives

In order for the questioning to have a constructive impact on people's life with technology it is important that we do not only challenge, but offer alternatives as well. The TCO screen certification had an impact because somebody started producing screens that followed the guidelines. We know that it is possible to make a public administration "go digital" without restraining all offices to the same narrow set of standard applications, and we know that a bottom-up process where applications get developed or customized from the bottom, and spread from there. Because it has been tried out in a number of projects where researchers have cooperated with users to come up with alternative solutions to their specific problems (e.g. Trigg & Bødker 1994, Grønbæk et al. 1995).

No product without process

Yet again, processes where people on their own work on alternatives are rare, and hence I believe that what we can do as researchers is to work on such projects. Projects where on the one hand, we commit to working with people, groups or organisations to explore what current and future technologies may support them in their particular setting. Not so much to build their future technology but to help them realize that they have a choice. On the other hand it is our duty as researchers to keep questioning what use quality may mean as the technological possibilities change, to keep exploring and offering alternatives and be critical as to how such alternatives may be used in actual work settings.

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