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D for Democracy

On Political Ideals in Participatory Design

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Abstract

This article joins the debate on political aspects in participatory design (PD) in Scandinavia. The article argues that the political aspect is not missing but rather inherent in current Scandinavian PD research. Democracy is brought forward as a core political ideal. It is discussed whether democracy is an outmoded political ideal and how to reach democracy. Finally, the article touches upon the discipline of handling political aspects in research.

Key words:

Democracy, politics, participatory design, systems design, Scandinavian IS research

1. Introduction

In the recent volume of Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems, Beck (2002) started a debate on political aspects in “participatory design in Scandinavia”. Beck calls for a “renewed focus on political perspectives” (78). She wants “to incite Scandinavian junior and senior researchers in computer science ... to consider political aspects of the work integral to our craft”, and she wants to “inspire reflection on what ‘political’ means or could mean in a systems development context” (78). This article joins the debate as a contribution from a “Scandinavian junior researcher” reflecting on “what ‘political’ means”... to me.

2. P for political, D for democracy...

Being born in the mid seventies and enrolling at Aalborg University when the moss had covered the stars which symbolize the political ideals of the university for several years, I find it difficult to identify myself with political ideals such as emancipation and marxism, particularly present in Scandinavian IS research from the 1970s and 80s. As you have probably heard in the news, young people like me also find it difficult to acknowledge trade unions and their role in society, just to point to another aspect of the foundation of the Scandinavian tradition with which I find it difficult to identify myself.

However, this does not mean that I find the political aspect unimportant in today’s Scandinavian PD research. Rather, I find the political aspect both important and special for the Scandinavian tradition and would be more troubled if we did not discuss and work with this aspect. In this way, I agree with Beck on the importance of the political aspect in our research. However, I do not fully agree on Beck’s “assumed lack of interest in political actions” in PD in Scandinavia (88). Looking at my own research field (Human Centered Informatics, <http://www.hci.hum.auc.dk>), which I believe to be a part of the “participatory design in Scandinavia” that Beck refers to, I do not find political actions missing but rather inherent in the research. As an example the political ideal of democracy is found in critical studies of the

integration of ICT into workplaces (Kanstrup 2003; Nyvang 2003; Wentzer 2000; Wentzer and Bygholm 2000) and action research on the use of dialogue in systems design (Kanstrup 2000; Nielsen, Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Danielsen 2003). Therefore, I do not agree with Beck’s discussion of the name of the research tradition (political versus participatory). I see the political aspect inherent in the “participation” and the very idea of “design” found in the Scandinavian tradition (vs. construction or technical development found in software engineering). Answering “D for Democracy”, I want to state that words, or terms, can have many meanings. PD is also about political aspects as well as participatory aspects, democratic aspects, design aspects, learning aspects, social aspects, etc. “What’s in a name?” Beck asks (88-89). “Many things”, is my answer, pointing to the many nuances which, in my opinion, makes Scandinavian IS research interesting and worth participating in.

3. Democracy – an outmoded political ideal?

To Beck’s question “what ‘political’ means” my answer is democracy (another reason for the title of this article). As remarked by Thoresen (1993): “Without democracy, we lose the general dimension, and are left with just a number of local methods for designing IT systems”. Following this, Beck’s notion of “participation is not enough” makes sense pointing to the danger of PD being just an applied technique without its political ideals. However, working with democracy as the core political ideal, I cannot understand why the political aspect that Beck is calling for has to be at the expense of participation. As argued above, I see the two as interdependent. But perhaps it is because my understanding is “outmoded” together with the PD “in a 1980ies form” as Beck writes (88).

This feeling of being “outmoded” continues when I read Beck’s words about democracy. She writes: “Democracy, however, is another central notion in PD which has lost its evocative power and even become somewhat discredited as a general ideal” (82). Beck seems to accept this loss of democracy as a political core in

Scandinavian PD research. She continues the sentence: "To the extent that an aim is to re-engage more (Scandinavian) researchers in exploring the political in whatever they are doing, other approaches are needed". After this, she points to ethics as a new "political potential". I find it sad if democracy is "discredited as a general ideal". Moreover, I find it strange that Beck seems to accept this, while she on the other hand defines "political" as "concern about dominance patterns" (78), which I read as a concern for democracy (why else be a watchdog for dominance patterns?).

4. The road to democracy

In the debate about Scandinavian PD research, I read the debate on democracy as a debate on how to reach democracy. One part of this discussion is whether the "roads to democracy" are "political or ethical" as briefly touched upon above (and more thorough in Bjerknes and Bratteteig 1995, 84-86). Another part of this discussion is whether user participation is leading to democracy which I will discuss in the following, since I do not agree on the political aspect to be at the expense of the participatory. I will use Lytje (2000) and Bjerknes and Bratteteig (1995) as examples of contributions to this debate.

Lytje argues against the idea of user participation as the way to democracy pointing out that "the user, regardless of the democratic surface, will function only at the premisses of the developer. The user is reduced to "the other" who exists only by virtue of "the first"" (Lytje 2000, 225, my translation). Lytje presents a theory of "Software as Text" as another language for use in systems design processes. I agree with Lytje's concern for the inequality between users and designers in systems design. However, I do not see that Lytje's concept of "Software as Text" brings a solution to this problem. By this I mean that the "texts" Lytje presents (244-282) are a difficult language to communicate in, as they primarily use the vocabulary of systems designers. In danger of being even more outmoded, I will stress the importance of the use and the development of a shared language in systems design in work with democratic processes. Again, I will point to the

understanding of the political aspect as inherent in the very idea of PD and, on this basis, why the many articles "about the improvement of the practice of systems design and development" (Stolterman 1995, 124) are also important and contributing to both the tradition and to the political aspect which Beck is looking for.

Bjerknes and Bratteteig (1995) argue that "it is not obvious that user participation in system development activities is a means or the only means" to democracy (91). Among other things, they argue against "the assumption that there is a connection between a democratic process and a democratic result" (91). In this matter I agree that work with democracy can be very complex in the way that "A truly democratic process can be conflicting and may have to challenge the present perspectives and traditions" (91). However, I do not agree that "sometimes a democratic result requires a non-democratic process" (91). Bjerknes and Bratteteig point to arrangements for admitting more women into male dominated areas as an example which, at first, seems harmless as well as justificative of their argument. Looking at other examples such as the recent (or present) war in Iraq, we see the same argument being used for justifying actions which I do not find harmless at all.

With reference to Bateson (and Mead) (2000), I believe that, we must be wary of our habit of thinking into "means" and "ends". As written by Bateson (and Mead), we risk arriving "at a totalitarian rather than a democratic system of life" "if we go on defining ends as separate from means *and* apply the social sciences as crudely instrumental means..." (160). As a solution, Bateson (and Mead) suggest "that we look for the "direction" and "values" implicit in the means, rather than looking ahead to a blueprinted goal and thinking of this goal as justifying or not justifying manipulative means" (160). This way of working with democracy, focusing on values and directions in the process instead of results or ends, is complex in the way that we are "setting forth into uncharted waters" as described by Bateson (164). But what else can we do? When we acknowledge that technology is not neutral but shapeable (Ehn 1988); that there is no "given reality "out there" which we come across during software development" (Floyd 1992, 89), systems design

is rather a "reality construction" where "Design creates its own foundations and sets its own goals" (ibid., 95). We also acknowledge what Orlikowsky calls "the duality of technology" (Orlikowsky 1992) pointing to how technology finds its meaning in use where it is shaped by as well as it shapes users and the use context (see also Bijker and Law (eds.) 2000).

I would say that research within the (Scandinavian) IS-field has shown us the importance of a focus on democratic processes based on an acknowledgement of the social factor of technology in its design and use. This again leaves me as quite "outmoded" pointing to the old road with participation and cooperation as the way towards democracy. Unlike Beck, I do not believe that this road is the problem of today's PD. Rather, I find new challenges in the development of the vehicles that we are driving on this road, in the way we drive them, and in the discussion of where to go (Kristensen et al. 2003)

5. Politics and research

In a discussion on objectivity, personal engagement and responsibility in research, Brox outlines seven stages in research:

1. Problematisation
2. Development of hypothesis / operationalisation
3. Fieldwork / collection of data
4. Analysis
5. Explaining
6. Practical conclusions and
7. Perspectives and reflections (Brox 1989, 32 ff., my translation).

Brox emphasize that it is legitimate for researchers' values to enter phase 1, 5, 6 and 7, while these values ought not to influence phase 2, 3 and 4. This, I find very comprehensible and easy to agree on but also important in the discussion about the role of politics in (PD) research. The consequence of my understanding of democracy as a political ideal inherent in Scandinavian PD research is that it is very important that we, as researchers, are aware of our political values, which Beck also stresses.

But it is just as important that we are able to separate politics and research in several of the phases that we are going through and never leave the "p" to be only a matter of politics.

If I consider my own present research and use of political values in this research, I see it mainly in phase 1 in the choice of empirical field and the focus for the study. I study projects in the Digital Northern Jutland in Denmark (see <http://thedigitalnorthdenmark.com/index.php/>).

In 2001, the Northern Jutland was granted funds by the Danish Government for experimentation with technology and enhancement of technological education and competencies among the entire population. In this way, the Digital Northern Jutland is based on a democratic ideal. Consequently, most projects within this frame are not high-tech experiments but rather experiments with integration and use of ICT in various practices. Examples are projects working with ICT in rural areas of the region, or projects working with access to ICT and competence development of children, disabled or elderly peoples. It may not bring me close to the edge of the technological future when I visit a primary school where a teacher presents me to their eight pre-Intel-Pentium computers. On the other hand, it brings me close to present people and practices that we may not forget in the technological development. With democracy as a political ideal, this is very important to me.

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