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A Modernised Participatory Design?

A response to Kyng

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1 Introduction

In his paper *Bridging the gap between politics and techniques: On the next practices of participatory design*, Morten Kyng (2010) identifies a number of elements which, taken together, amount to a substantial change in the character and environment of participatory design (PD) from the 1970s to the 2000s. Almost without our noticing, what many of us actually do in the name of PD has deviated from how we still often describe it, and this poses new challenges for carrying out PD that need to be explicitly recognised. The elements Kyng points to, summarised in his table 1, are the ideals of PD, attitudes towards user and producer companies, the role of intellectual property rights, the funding of PD projects, the character and the location of users, the ways in which their interests are safeguarded, typical project outcomes, and lastly the PD techniques that are brought to bear.

Kyng's observations on these matters are insightful, and it is useful to draw them together and consider their overall impact, as he has done. In responding I will discuss five issues: PD in the current political conjuncture; what are the real benefits of PD, and its relationship to other disciplines; the professionalisation of academic research; the conditions under which PD could become a mainstream practice; and (briefly) PD's move beyond the workplace to fragmented users and distributed settings.

2 A post-political participatory design?

Under politics, Kyng identifies a shift from workplace democracy and the defence of workers' interests—taken as standing systematically in opposition to the interests of employers—to a

more diffuse focus on the involvement of users, yielding ICT design which is better for all, workers and employers alike. In parallel, there has been a strong diminution in the role of trades unions as partners in PD projects and in the defence of workers' interests. Similarly, companies, whether as producers of ICT or as employers of users, are no longer considered as antagonists but as partners. This echoes long-standing central debates about the relative importance of politics and efficacy in PD.

Kyng is mostly relaxed about these developments. I am in no position to complain about this, having myself advocated a 'reformist' agenda for PD, at least in the procurement of large-scale ICT systems in the public sector (Shapiro 2005). Some might argue that Kyng should debate this position more explicitly with those who argue the opposite, as in Beck's (2002) claim precisely that 'P is for Political: Participation is Not Enough'. This would be unfair, however, since I think Kyng makes it clear that he no longer regards these issues as relevant, at least in the context of ICT design. His position is well encapsulated in his quotation from an SJIS paper of Mike Robinson's (1998): "I believe that the results will stand on their own, and, when undertaken self-consciously, will enhance dignity, self-respect, and self-confidence. Although there is a connection, I do not believe such work will per se remedy injustice or significantly shift power-relations. This is a task for political action—and some of the actors will be Trade Unions." As ICT becomes normalised and diffused, so too does its critical edge. We could see this as a shift from a producer focus, as with trade unions or for that matter ICT designers, to a consumer and civil society focus, including other actors such as special interest groups representing, for example, patients. This is reasonable, and until recently would seem inevitable, but political and economic developments may make it worth a second look.

Kyng's paper is about recent change, and one of the most important such changes must surely be that the global economy is undergoing a profound crisis—the first for some time to truly deserve that term. It would be too brave to claim that while communism died with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, free-market capitalism also died with the collapse of Lehman Brothers on 15 September 2008, leaving the field of political economy (that is, fundamental choices about the ways in which productive activity is socially organised) open once more to radical change. But equally, it is not as if nothing has happened, and the crisis may present important opportunities, including for PD.

First, the perfection and inevitability of free market capitalism have at least been called into question, and so the extent to which big corporations have held governments in thrall may now be vulnerable. Alternatives are not obvious, but are at least being considered. As straws in the wind, in the UK there has been a recent series of television programmes exploring (even celebrating) the John Lewis Partnership, a large chain of department stores and food supermarkets which is organised as a cooperative (BBC 2010). And the original cooperative society has, after a long period of stagnation, relaunched itself as a quality and value local provider. On a more dramatic scale, as I write there are riots in Greece about the austerity measures introduced to address its sovereign debt, foregrounding questions about who is to blame and who should pay. As comparable measures are set to generalise across much of Europe, and beyond, the political consequences may be dynamic. Second, governments are finally coming to see how much they have been 'ripped off' over decades by massively expensive public sector IT projects that have failed to deliver. Third, again, governments are now burdened with huge debts. This means on the one hand that they still look to ICT projects as a means to reduce the cost of government and the

provision of public services; but also that they have a desperate need to secure effectiveness and good value. The second and third of these factors also apply to private sector ICT procurement.

Factors such as these could amount to a political and economic conjuncture in which arguments for the virtues of the PD approach may be heard. I believe this conjuncture is important because I do not take as optimistic a view as Kyng of the prospects for PD, and I think it will need all the extra help it can get. I take this up in section 5.

3 Why participate?

There is the assumption running through Kyng's paper that PD is 'a good thing', but he has rather little to say about why this is so, and since his paper is all about the profound ways in which PD has changed, this is not something that can be taken for granted. When industrial democracy was put forward as an inherent goal then PD was self justifying, in the same way that political democracy can be argued to be inherently preferable, even if it occasionally produces aberrant outcomes. But since Kyng has explicitly abandoned industrial democracy in favour of efficacy, this 'hollowed out' version of PD loses the privileged status that it enjoys, at least in its own eyes, and becomes just one in a plethora of competing techniques. That requires it to justify itself in different ways.

A key issue here is whether to take a 'weak' or a 'strong' (one might also say pragmatic or theoretical) view of the benefits of closely involving users throughout the process of design. The weak or pragmatic view is that there is a great deal that users can contribute to successful design, if one takes the trouble to involve them. They are experts in their own processes and so can have valuable inputs across the board: what innovations are possible, what are the blockages and frustrations with the ways in which things are currently done, what kinds of tools and support would be useful, whether prototypes of these tools are actually any good.

The strong or theoretical view, deriving from phenomenology and ethnomethodology, sees human practice as inherently social, carried out in constant inter-relation and calibration with others. Further, it sees the fine-grained, contextual, situated character of practice as so infinite in its variability that in practice nothing is ever exactly repeated, but is newly enacted on each occasion (Shapiro 2005, p. 31). Addressing this adequately in design therefore calls for close and detailed observation and analysis (e.g., Heath and Luff 1992; Büscher 2006). While people's own practices are of course fully available to them, this is in a manner that they enact rather than straightforwardly report, so their participation is not just a matter of garnering their good ideas.

These different views have implications for PD's relations with other ICT design disciplines and perspectives. On the weak view, PD's relations with a wide range of neighbours can be simply cumulative. But this produces its own problems because, if the interests of users' employers are now considered as legitimate, who is to say in any particular instance what balance of PD and, for example, business process re-engineering will produce the greater benefit (profit)? On this view, then, PD appears solipsistic with regard to its neighbours, in a way that is no longer justified by its conceptual framework.

On the strong view, relations with neighbours will often be ones of contestation rather than collaboration. This is because the 'conventional' sciences, including mainstream computer sci-

ence and psychology, fundamentally misconceive the nature of human action by locating it in the isolated individual, and separating 'mind' from 'body' (Coulter 1989). They therefore understand, for example, work activities as a sequence of separate, mainly intentional steps carried out by individual actors which are connected, if at all, through interfaced sequencing procedures using communicative 'exchanges' (Shapiro 2005, p. 31). Contesting these views was initiated, famously, by Suchman in relation to Artificial Intelligence (1987, 2007), and it is perhaps a failing that there are not more explicit and detailed analyses of contested interdisciplinary relations in ICT design (Shapiro 1996). On this view, PD does not only garner ideas for better design, but seeks to protect users (and *their* users, e.g., callers to call centres) from the 'techno-slavery' of false models enforced by blind and rigid systems, a kind of digi-Fordism. However, since this puts it 'at war' with other perspectives, it raises major political problems for its realisation. I return to this in section 5.

4 Professional participatory design

Though he does not himself apply the term to them, a number of the changes that Kyng discusses may be thought of as aspects of the 'professionalisation' of PD. Kyng points to a shift from internal funding provided mainly by universities to external funding provided by research councils and development agencies, often with explicit industrial partnership requirements. At the same time, typical project outcomes have changed from educational materials for users, often provided through their unions, to research papers and prototype systems. There has also been a change in the role of intellectual property rights, which used not to be a concern in PD, but are now often treated as a protected asset both by individual researchers and by their universities.

Kyng is quite right that these changes have crept up on us without much discussion, and it is worth pausing to reflect on the enormity of them. In the early period, academics had more time, and more control over how they disposed of it. They could pursue openly political goals in their research, which was funded primarily as their own time, that is, through their salaries. They were relatively free to define their own objectives and outputs without undue pressure. They could choose the nature of their engagement with users, and their motivation and enthusiasm for doing so was driven by the prospect of contributing to radical social transformation. Career advancement, and certainly monetary gain, did not figure very largely. (All this is, of course, to idealise just a little.)

Now, research is funded beyond the dreams of avarice, as seen from those early days. But the price is substantial loss of control, and a heavy burden of accountability and compliance. Research projects must fit in with increasingly directive funding programmes, which often require industrial partnerships. Universities are under pressure to demonstrate 'third mission' contributions to the economy, and pass these pressures and incentives on to their staff. It is true that the former young radicals are now senior professors in charge of funding programmes, and still practicing PD, but their freedom of manoeuvre (should they want it) is limited. Individuals and departments are subjected to competitive rating and ranking, and must deliver exactly the kinds of outputs that are most creditable in that context, mainly refereed articles in leading journals. Once we have achieved them, we are off to the next funded project. Other motivations, such as

the continuous involvement of users and the transformation of the user experience, may be no less sincerely held, but they are weak and sickly flowers amid the storm of de-traditionalisation and the curtailment of professional autonomy.

What is more, the earlier motivation for genuine and continuing user engagement, namely the prospect of contributing to radical social transformation, had entirely evaporated. What is capable of taking its place? The answer, it seems, is money: control by academics of the intellectual property rights generated in their research, and maybe participation in spin-off companies formed to exploit it. These are tempting and exciting prospects, and may even be the most effective means of bringing PD developments to fruition, but what a transformation!

The most painful question is whether the incorporation of PD into the mainstream of academic and commercial practice has gone so far as actually to make its relationship to users quite exploitative and nakedly instrumental, and to make our repeated claims about the centrality of continuously involving users quite rhetorical and hypocritical. This dismaying revelation is actually quite credible, and should cause many of us to reflect critically on what we do.

5 Yes we can

In a paper for the 2005 *Critical Computing* conference, I argued that PD deserved to establish itself in the mainstream of providing large scale ICT systems, especially in the public sector, and I set out a demanding and elaborate agenda for trying to achieve this (Shapiro 2005). Kyng now embarrasses me by pointing out that this task is virtually accomplished. He terms this the 'concrete consensus' of supportive funding bodies, willing partners, a system that benefits both its users and its buyers, companies that will implement and market the system, and other companies that will buy it. Kyng's main examples are the Dragon project for a global container booking system for the Maersk shipping line, and the iHospital system for the coordination of surgery.

I accept what Kyng claims about this, and if Scandinavia is witnessing a new resurgence of PD then that is indeed splendid news. But if so then it is still relatively isolated, and what is desperately needed is a series of powerful and convincing success stories and demonstrations of PD's achievements, so that the conjunctural possibilities discussed earlier can be realised. And one of the main stumbling blocks here is actually telling the story. We can see this in the references that Kyng gives for his successful examples, which are either projects' own websites, or relatively obscure reports, so that their external visibility up to now is low.

The failure to tell the full story reflects the very professionalisation process discussed above. In early PD, there was time and scope to explain what had been attempted and achieved in an integrated way, in the round, from the big picture, and sometimes at book length. Recent large scale projects with a strong PD element may have had major successes, and many publications, but these tend to be detailed papers that focus on narrow aspects of a design or of the research findings. Before anyone has time to stand back and reflect on the real integrated achievements in the round, everyone is on to the next project. Often, the only place the big vision survives in print is in the original (unpublished) project proposal.

Good and reassuring stories are needed because I believe PD remains overwhelmingly alien to most relevant interlocutors, whether in mainstream research, in government, or in industry.

In its political guise, PD appears threatening, bizarre, and perhaps outdated. Where PD rests on its respect for the intricacy and creativity of situated practice, it appears obscure, bizarre and even cultish, relying as it does on such outlandish specialisms as phenomenology and ethnomethodology, and with its unwelcome message that everything is even more complicated than you think. The only points of contact with managerial perspectives are faint echoes of Elton Mayo's 'human relations' school of the 1930s and 1940s (Mayo 1933), as reflected by management gurus such as Tom Peters (2010) when they contrast the enthusiasm and creativity that people typically display in their hobbies and voluntary activities, with their disengagement and boredom at work – but powerfully overlaid by the 'scientific' and macho management perspectives that have dominated recent decades.

6 PD 2.0

Kyng points to the change from ICT as a specialised area of technology, used by relatively small numbers of workers for particular kinds of activities such as engineering and administration, to ICT as deeply and routinely embedded in many aspects of both work and non-work life. In consequence, current potential beneficiaries of PD include large numbers of non-wage-earners such as patients and family members, and they will be scattered in the home and elsewhere, not conveniently assembled in the workplace throughout the working day. This amounts to a kind of ubiquitous or pervasive participatory design, with fragmented users and distributed settings, and Kyng argues that we need new techniques to meet this challenge. He mentions in passing (in Table 2) that new social media may provide a platform for this, and it is intriguing to think of the likes of MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and wikis being taken up to underpin a 'Participatory Design 2.0', as has already been done, for example, in Malmö (Sokoler et al. 2007), and other teams are certainly working on it.

7 A modernised participatory design?

Kyng is surely right about the main features of the changes he describes in how PD is currently practiced. What this amounts to is that PD has, for good and ill, been drawn into the disciplining imperatives of modernisation—a 'new PD' in the sense of Tony Blair's 'new Labour'. It has accommodated itself to the realities of its political and professional environment. This can hardly be a surprise, but it has not up to now figured in PD's self presentation, which is to that extent mythic or even self-deluded. These issues deserve further consideration, and in greater depth – but that is exactly what Kyng is calling for.

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