Participatory design in an era of participation

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EDITORIAL

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This special issue on participatory design in an era of participation presents emerging topics and discussions from the thirteenth Participatory Design Conference (PDC), held at Aarhus University in August 2016. The PDC 2016 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Participatory Design conference series, which began in 1990 with the first biannual conference in Seattle. Since then, the PDC conferences have continued to bring together a multidisciplinary, international community of researchers and practitioners around issues of cooperative design. The theme for the 2016 PDC conference was 'Participatory Design in an Era of Participation'. Critical and constructive discussions were invited on the values, characteristics, politics and future practices of participatory design in an era in which participation has now become pervasive (Bossen, Smith, Kanstrup, McDonnell, et al. 'PDC 16, Volume 1,' 2016; Bossen, Smith, Kanstrup, Huybrechts, et al. 'PDC 16, Volume 2,' 2016).

All five contributions in this special issue address both core and emerging topics in participatory design research. All take their starting-point in a fundamental research interest in the design and research of information and communication technology (ICT), and more broadly in technologies in general in which various kinds of stakeholder are involved. Exploring participation in the research and design of ICT has been central to participatory design since this research community first began to emerge in the early 1990s (Greenbaum and Kyng 1991; Schuler and Namioka 1993). Central to the pursuit of how to involve end-users in the development of ICT were core ideals of democracy that were rooted in the North American and Scandinavian political landscapes of the time as these underwent fundamental change. In the early Scandinavian research projects, this was evidenced in a series of projects that involved workers and fought for workers' rights to participate in the development of technology at their workplaces (Bjerknes et al. 1987; Ehn 1988). This political attention has remained a characteristic of PDC ever since, though in various forms and sometimes at much weaker intensity, and complemented by pragmatic and ethical arguments for involving users in design. Participatory design is rooted in a concern for located accountabilities in technology design (Suchman 2002) and in values stating that those who will be affected by new technology have a legitimate reason to be involved in its design (Kensing and Blomberg 1998). In early participatory design research, involving users in technology design was new, provoking, and challenging because establishing a space in which researchers, software enterprises, managers and end-users could meet, exchange ideas and learn from one another required the development of new techniques and methods for scaffolding participatory processes and interactions. This focus on approaches to establish mutual learning among the various stakeholders has been a core strand of research in participatory design ever since the first conference. Participatory approaches and concepts continue to be developed and critically researched across a very broad range of application domains, even as new disciplines addressing user involvement change the landscape in which participation in design unfolds (Halskov and Hansen 2015; Sanders and Stappers 2008). For a recent overview of participatory design, see Simonsen and Robertson (2013).

In the last decade, 'participation' has become popular across industry and public administration as a way to better connect to customers and publics. The growth of the internet and

social media has led to a celebration of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006), the boundaries between production, consumption and users have become blurred leading to neologisms such as 'producers' and 'prosumers' (Toffler 1980; Bruns 2007), and new narratives of how users are produced (Hyysalo, Elgaard, and Oudshoorn 2016). Participation is often an integrated part of both design research and service and product development. It is applied across research and industry under a diversity of headlines from participatory design, co-design and co-creation to cooperative design and design thinking.

As participatory design continues to engage not only with the public sphere but also with everyday life, and as researchers engage stakeholders in experimental practices of innovation through a long-term engagement in technology design, social innovation and future-making (Binder et al. 2011; Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012; Ehn, Nilsson, and Topgaard 2014), the core values and ideals of participatory design are taking on new meanings and forms. These experimental practices rely on open-ended processes of design and on value-based strategies of engagement which will allow meaning- and decision-making to emerge in often contentious private and public contexts (Iversen, Halskov, and Leong 2012; Andersen et al. 2015). Such *in situ* explorations of sustainable change between diverse stakeholders are constantly evolving. They are very different from a uniform focus on innovation in society at large, and they emphasise the continuing importance of critical and contextualised approaches.

In contemporary digitised society, the distribution and promise of participation cuts across societal issues at different levels. Civic engagement in ICT is often seen as an inherent key success factor in opening up new opportunities for democracy. Participatory cultures such as the sharing economy, crowdfunding and digital media have created new forms of engagement in distributed spaces. Public engagement in radical social innovation is being used to address the shrinking finances available to public services, and citizen-involving projects and labs are proliferating across different domains as a result. Maker technologies, notions of hacking and shared data are promoting a civic engagement with technological innovation that is changing the material and socio-economic contexts of production. At the same time, the internet, big data, machine-learning and large-scale infrastructuring have led to a centralisation of capital and data that represents a challenge to the core democratic ideals of civic participation, users' rights to their own data, and privacy.

In general, the ongoing ever-wider diffusion of participation and ICT brings with it opportunities and challenges that call for sustained reflection and for the development of new perspectives on the values, characteristics, politics and future forms of participatory design. What is the role of participatory design in an era of participation? How do we critically investigate emerging participatory cultures so as to facilitate alternative futures and practices? What qualifies as participation to whom? How do researchers and designers create meaningful processes of co-creation for specific people, communities and contexts? These are central questions that the authors writing in this special issue address from various perspectives. These papers were invited to represent the diversity of contemporary participatory design research, and to foreground some of the important points of attention for contemporary and future participatory research.

Pushing the boundaries

The five papers in this special issue share a reflective sensitivity to the core values of participatory design, which they apply and unfold in different contexts, pushing towards new boundaries of participatory design in contemporary society. Most of the authors are younger scholars who are engaging critically with emerging fields and are showing possible directions both for participation and codesign. From diverse locations and contexts, the papers dismantle idealised efforts to democratise innovation as 'participation for everyone and everywhere' by demonstrating how specific acts of engagement between designers and users unfold in situated and mundane

contexts. These range from discussions of 'the common' in the contested political landscapes of left-wing Italian think tanks (Teli, Di Fiore and D'Andrea), to Western reflections on 'making' when tied to larger sociopolitical structures of technological innovation in China and Indonesia (Lindtner and Lin); from the crucial implementation of water systems in rural Uganda (Ssozi-Mugarura, Blake and Rivett), to temporal experiments that use the past as a resource for spatial planning in the post-industrial outskirts of Belgium (Huybrechts, Hendriks and Martens), and finally to the carefully curated acts of personalised engagement with elderly people with dementia in Portugal (Branco, Quental and Ribeiro). Together, the contributions point to potential directions of future-making in, for, and with ordinary people and stakeholders.

In 'Making and its promises', Lindtner and Lin take issue with the maker and DIY movements that have sometimes been seen as a reinvigoration of the participatory design ideals of democracy and empowerment. Through two ethnographic case studies based in Shenzhen, China and Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Lindtner and Lin show how making and DIY can be adopted and shaped by situated and particular political ideals that may or may not align with or carry forward the ideals of participatory design. The paper argues that, contrary to ethnocentric understandings of how making, DIY and by implication participatory design travel around the world, these processes once integrated into specific contexts can become something else.

In 'Computing and the common: a case of Participatory Design with think tanks', Teli, Di Fiore and D'Andrea take an explicit political position and suggest that one way in which participatory design can pursue political aims of democracy and empowerment is through strategies that nourish 'the common'—that is, the raw material and the outcome of social cooperation. This can be nourished, made to grow or, by capital, be dispossessed. These authors draw on their work with Italian think tanks to show how such a nourishing of the common can be facilitated through cooperation between researchers and participants and by the use of participatory design techniques and processes. They suggest four strategies through which more general processes of strengthening the common against financialised capitalism can be enacted. Thus, while Lindtner and Lin provide reflexivity upon the contexts in which user-involving projects unfold in order to inform participatory design interventions, Teli, Di Fiore and D'Andrea suggest specific strategies for how to intervene.

The imaginary and the plausible become central elements in 'Counterfactual scripting: challenging the temporality of participation' by Huybrechts, Hendriks and Martens. Their approach to design for communities and political contexts is to use counterfactual scripting to critically inquire and give form to participatory design processes in the context of a small Belgian village, using the past as an active resource in the creation of proposals for future spatial planning. The authors draw upon counterfactual history to give form to a pluralistic process in which alternatives for the past can be used to speculate about the future. They not only extend the temporal perspective of participatory design so as to emphasise the past as a creative resource for participation; they also demonstrate how communities can themselves become agents in a process of decision-making in which their own temporal and political contexts, extending 10 years back and 10 years forward in time, are interwoven with their engagement with researchers in the present.

In 'Codesigning with communities to support rural water management in Uganda', Ssozi-Mugarura, Blake and Rivett present a full-cycle design process in the context of a mobile application for rural water management in communities in Uganda. This design process includes co-design activities, design results, implementation and evaluation. The paper's focus is on the central mechanics of conducting participatory design in an African community context, and its contribution is an important example of how to develop socio-technical alternatives. Like Huybrechts, Hendriks and Martens, these authors start out from a premise of community-based participatory design. They reflect on the barriers to and enabling factors of this approach in a rural context in a developing country. Specifically, their long-term collaboration with communities beyond the initial design period gives the paper a strong focus on sustainability. A central

finding is the importance of knowledgeable and stable intermediaries in community-based participatory design.

In the final paper, 'Personalised participation: an approach to involve people with dementia and their families in a participatory design project', Branco, Quental and Ribeiro take a highly personalised approach to participation in designing for the individual. Using design materials to constructively co-create personalised encounters, the authors show how they engage elderly people with dementia along with their families in the design process. They demonstrate how an open and flexible approach to 'use' and 'design' can be developed using 'incomplete artefacts' to provide moments of feedback and dialogue with these elderly individuals. A sensitivity to personalised participation in each encounter and the evocative use of unique design materials allows the individual's role in configuring their own participation to emerge. This paper prompts reflections on how, in a fast-moving contemporary society, design processes can be configured both practically and ethically so as to draw out meaningful and richly creative participation that recognises individuals' unique qualities, needs and contributions.

The five papers in this special issue demonstrate how different perspectives on participation can be used and reconfigured in diverse contemporary contexts. The rich cases show how participatory design's democratic and political values and ideals continue to be applied to shape and generate reflections and opportunities that matter in specific contexts. It is this constructive and creative attention to people's aspirations and values, the political contexts, and the particularities of each setting that creates the depth and qualities of participatory design processes that are often forgotten in the overriding concern with innovation and technology for 'the future'. In the contemporary era of participation, participatory design research shows how the unique translation and operationalisation of participation can be shaped—through critical, political, creative, ethical and empathic approaches—in such a way as to design sustainable technologies and alternative futures in everyday contexts.

Of course, participatory design is a subject with a long history in the *CoDesign* journal, as witnessed by the 2012 special issue on this subject (vol. 8, No. 2–3) as well as the journal's many other papers on aspects of participatory design. This special issue brings new and recent perspectives on core participatory design research topics to an already vibrant research field. We hope that it will stimulate scholars as they elaborate perspectives for future research in participatory practices of design.[1]

Note

1. A central site of resources, including all PDC proceedings 1990–2016, is available at: http://pdcproceedings.org/index.html.

Acknowledgement

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