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DRAFT: Introduction to Special Issue on Reimagining Participatory Design – Emerging Voices

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1 Introduction

In this Introduction to the Special Issue on Re-Imagining Participatory Design, we wish to provide a context for the following papers by elucidating some of the themes that have helped shape the field of participatory design as well as touch on some emerging issues. We do not attempt a formal historical review of the participatory design field, nor examine the ongoing debates about the concept of ‘participation’, as these have been discussed elsewhere ([21, 22], etc.). Rather, we explore some important topics that have helped shape the field, and highlight some emergent concerns.

When the topic “participatory design of information technology in the workplace” emerged in the 1970s it sought to rebalance power and agency among managers and workers. This was a time when, in many Western countries, social democratic parties held sway, a majority of workers belonged to trade unions, collective bargaining agreements were common, and social welfare provisions were sacrosanct. Hence, workers and their organizations were seeking to establish fora and methods to influence the development of information technology

both locally, nationally and internationally. Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, the political, social, economic and technical environment within which discussions about participatory design take place has shifted significantly from that earlier time. The Neo-Liberal agenda has massively re-structured the powers of individual States vs. global business, capital and labour work on a global level, regulatory regimes governing various economic sectors have shrunk, the power and influence of trade unions has declined precipitously, and technological innovations have been harnessed to amplify many of these trends – crowdsourcing, outsourcing, etc. [14].

Information Technology has also developed significantly over the years, becoming a vital infrastructure for economic development. Today's Information Technology domains are more heterogeneous and less defined. In many of these new contexts, it is difficult to bring socio-technical conflicts into the open, whereby stakeholders are empowered to participate. As a result, power and agency seems to have gravitated away from end-users and other stakeholders towards larger institutional players – large corporations, government and multi-national agencies. This is also true of bottom-up interactions, including those of the so-called 'sharing' economy, which are often understood as commercial disruptions and which often obfuscate conflicts among stakeholders. Meanwhile, the label "participatory design" seems to have become synonymous with a more banal form of "user-centered" design, concentrating on local issues of usability and user satisfaction. This is a far cry from earlier work in the field, where Participatory Design not only sought to incorporate users in design, but also to intervene upon situations of conflict through developing more democratic processes.

Coping with these changes has become a matter for debate in recent years amongst many members of the Participatory Design community. Recent discussions at such venues as the bi-annual Participatory Design conferences and related workshops and meetings – especially the 2015 Aarhus Conference, and Participatory Design Conference in 2016, led to the articulation of a number of concerns amongst the Editors of this Special Issue about the state of participatory design. Several themes emerged:

- a sense that Participatory Design has lost some of its clarity and lacks political teeth
- questions about how well the original so-called 'Scandinavian model' applies in the rest of the world, and even to Scandinavia today
- concerns that computer users worldwide have lost ground in terms of their

rights and grievance procedures; questions about how well Participatory Design can scale, from the interventions with small teams of the past to more global concerns

- and finally some concern about the future of the Participatory Design ‘community’ – given that many of the founding thinkers of Participatory Design are retiring, and a new cadre of activist researchers are required

This panoply of concerns encouraged us to step back, take stock, and, in a sense, reimagine the field of participatory design – a decision that led us to propose the idea of this Special Issue. Specifically, rather than working out an answer for ourselves, we wanted to host a conversation from both inside and outside the Participatory Design community concerning its future. In order to encourage the latter, we especially choose a journal for this Special Issue that has a much wider and more heterogeneous readership than those most often associated with Participatory Design issues. We wrote the Call for this special issue to solicit research contributions that would address the potentials and failures of participatory design in pursuing its democratizing project in emerging Information Technology domains. We asked for research papers that would open up new horizons in Participatory Design, or critically examine successes and failures of the past. We envisaged many possible ways to proceed these discussions and wished to welcome conceptual, methodological, and empirical manuscripts. Our intent was to encourage authors to think more boldly about the future of participatory design, without specifying further what that might entail. In continuation of our own conversations, however, we were hoping for both contributions that would be conceptually different and radical, for new and different empirical work, for innovative methods, new technological visions, and in particular for work that would bring longer and wider scales back into the picture of Participatory Design in various ways.

In the first round of our Call for Papers we requested that potential authors submit a short abstract of their planned paper, in order to gauge the strength of interest in the topic, and the variety of concerns and issues being addressed. We were overwhelmed by the response to this Call, with a total of 73 abstracts submitted. Many interesting topics were raised, and it was very difficult to whittle this material down to a manageable number that would be invited to proceed with the development of a full manuscript for review. We received 24 first round submissions that have now been reviewed in a rigorous review process leading to the final 5 papers in this special issue. We have worked with both junior and senior reviewers of whom many are, or have been, regular contributors to e.g., the

Participatory Design conferences, and mixed them in with reviewers who have come from the wider field of Human-Computer Interaction with particularly relevant foci or backgrounds for the topics covered in the manuscripts.

2 The Selected Papers

The papers in this special issue address a number of important societal spheres or social challenges and possibilities such as the involvement of young immigrants in society at large in deciding and shaping their own future in particular [9], Smart Cities [12] and e-government [20], feminism and Utopianism [2], and public-sector projects [8]. In general, the papers argue for stronger, longer-term visions and technologies, and towards educational/formational agendas on, and across, different scales. They bring to the table related research approaches such as Participatory Research and Public Participation in Scientific Research. They also, and in particular, bring to the table the connections between citizens participatory activities and the organizational and political levels of civic society and government institutions. In particular Bardzell [2] addresses the local versus global/universal scale. Several papers point out that the possibilities and challenges in various parts of the global society are different: Bødker and Kyng [8] discuss what kinds of new visions and agendas the Scandinavian societies can bring to the more global scene – without imposing particular generalizations of structures or methods on other parts of the world.

Looking at the submissions received for the Special Issue, surprisingly few Non-Western papers arrived, and those that did were unfortunately culled in the editorial reviewing process, despite our efforts to encourage them along the way. This lack of Non-Western (i.e. other than European/North American/Australian) contributions, or their rejection during the review process, was a disappointment. We discuss how to ensure that these voices are heard in discussions about the future of Participatory Design later in this Introduction, where we envisage an ongoing dialogue both within and outside the Participatory Design community, hopefully kick-started by this Special Issue. We were also expecting more contributions from the mainstream Participatory Design community, but we did not have many, and those we had, did not survive the reviewing and resubmission process. In addition, we were expecting contributions from theoretical traditions in Participatory Design such as Thing-oriented papers [10, 3, 7], but we did not get many contributions of that nature either. The positive angle on this is of course, that the papers that went out for review opened up to new contributors.

Many of the submissions offered a history of Participatory Design as a prelude to their own contribution. When reading the historical accounts it appears that authors wish to orient themselves, and find their position in a space between “anything goes” and what one might term a “theocracy”, where certain positions or versions of Participatory Design history have been promoted as the ‘correct’ versions of the gospel. As an example, many versions point back to the Utopia project ([4, 5, 6]) to show that Participatory Design was not originally limited to a close co-design process with a small group of users, but was also about visions beyond users’ immediate needs and perceptions, about democratic educational agendas and about societal and organizational decision-making and power issues. While attempting to position one’s work in the field is an important exercise, the dangers of attempting “objective” histories of the field can result in reviewers (legitimately, in our view) questioning the veracity of the accounts proffered, and thus taking energy away from the novel contributions present in the work being reviewed. Let us briefly note some key features of the accepted papers:

The paper by Bustamante et al. – ‘Participatory Design and Participatory Research: an HCI case study with young forced migrants’ [9] – examines Participatory Design with vulnerable groups. By combining strategies from Participatory Design and Participatory Research the project works with young forced migrants to help develop a technology-based tool to support their resettlement. By discussing the role of “safe spaces” for participation it focuses on intercultural collaborations between young forced migrants and young members of the host community. The paper creates a meeting in two senses: By emphasizing the meeting between young, forced immigrants and locals, and by bringing together strategies from participatory design and participatory research. It discusses how to accommodate multiple perspectives and interests in the meeting between locals and young forced immigrants, since this meeting often leads to a new group of marginalized (those whose opinions cannot be included). The paper has a strong emphasis on collaborating with the young migrants in a democratic way and considers them as co-researchers who contribute across the diverse aspects of the project – research questions, objectives, outcomes.

‘Utopias of Participation: Feminism, Design, and the Futures’ by Shaowen Bardzell [2] addresses the question of how participatory design researchers and practitioners can pursue commitments to social justice and democracy while retaining commitments to reflective practice, the voices of the marginal, and design experiments “in the small.” Using the case of an urban renewal project in Taipei, Taiwan, the paper proposes a cooperative engagement between fem-

inist utopianism and participatory design at the levels of theory, methodology, and on-the-ground practice. This way of thinking in particular focuses on the tensions between local and global, marginal and central, plurality and moral universals. The paper is a relevant and interesting discussion of how Participatory Design can relate to its democratic and political intentions in an age of urban, ubiquitous and global computing, by proposing new theoretical and methodological support through its introduction of feminist utopian thinking, which is more process-oriented, participative, situated, contingent and emergent than much traditional utopian thinking.

‘Participatory Design that matters – facing the big issues’ by Susanne Bødker and Morten Kyng [8] reflects on the Participatory Design field, viewing it as providing a glimpse of possibilities and alternatives. This paper is critical of the current state of Participatory Design both when it comes to addressing here and now issues for small groups of (volunteer) people, and in terms of Participatory Design methods – where much current Participatory Design is focusing on direct co-design methods within groups of users and designers. It wishes to revitalize and revise Participatory Design to help people influence big issues that matter by proposing a set of key elements including changed partnership with users, new roles of researchers as activists, demanding visions for lasting impact, and more democratic control. The paper argues for projects on a different scale, and for different designer roles, in order to influence these ‘big issues’ and work with processes and technologies that provide alternatives and have a lasting impact on the use setting at large.

‘Adapting Participatory Design to emerging civic engagement initiatives in the new public sector: renewing Participatory Design concepts in resource-scarce organizations’ by Sofie Pilemalm [20] addresses the role of Participatory Design in the new public sector – specifically, emerging civic engagement and so-called we-government initiatives. The paper presents a case study, applying Participatory Design to a civic engagement project taking place in the Swedish emergency response sector. This paper connects both to more traditional Participatory Design and to public sector projects. It examines new ways of engaging civic participation with specific public sector projects, using social media/ community technologies. In the literature, community Participatory Design/engagement is largely happening without connection to public sector initiatives, whereas e-governance is often only focusing on internal government processes and not on practices that engage directly with citizens. The paper argues that applying traditional Participatory Design concepts to the new collaborative forms that are emerging in resource-constrained public sector organizations becomes some-

thing of a paradox that upcoming generations of Participatory Design need to address. At the same time, alternative ways of working with Participatory Design must continue to consider aspects of representation and democracy, if they are to remain distinct from other user-centered design approaches.

‘Amplifying Quiet Voices: Challenges and Opportunities for Participatory Design at an Urban Scale’ by Gooch et al. [12] considers the role of citizens in Smart City projects. They point out that current methods for engaging urban populations in participatory design activities are somewhat limited and describe their approach to empower socially disadvantaged citizens, using a variety of both social and technological tools, in a Smart City project. Through analysing the nature of citizens’ concerns and proposed solutions, they argue that engaging citizens can uncover hyper-local concerns that provide a foundation for finding solutions to address citizen concerns. Four key challenges are identified for participatory design at an urban scale; balancing scale with the personal, control of the process, integrating of citizen-led work with local authorities.

3 Glimpses of an Agenda

A shared sense that Participatory Design was at a crossroads prompted this special issue, and as we look back at the research community’s response to this special issue, we begin to see some of its contours. One of those contours is a desire to gather Participatory Design back in, to reform it, to pull it together somehow. We have seen a tendency to retell Participatory Design’s history in a number of the submissions, including those accepted and not accepted, and also in published Participatory Design research ([21, 15]).

The concern is that Participatory Design is spread too thin, has become too diluted: it has spread itself across geographies, ideologies, methods, and time itself – losing definition or political teeth ([18, 8]). The myth of the origin returns – we look back to UTOPIA for cues, in hopes of finding a “pure” Participatory Design that we can check ourselves against. Research has challenged just how participatory Participatory Design is, e.g., observing that Participatory Design often sets agendas prior to initiating participation [19].

Some researchers have begun to shy away from the label Participatory Design, in case they are not pure enough (we recall a presentation by researcher John Vines, in which he characterized his method as “Participatory Design-like” – scare quotes and all!). Another contour is an awareness of the problem of scale. In “classic” Participatory Design the scale was relatively manageable: workers and managers within a single profession in a particular region. The Participa-

tory Design workshop (see, e.g., [13]) was born in, and functioned at, such a scale. Some Participatory Design researchers still seem to prefer it, witness the “democratic experiments in the small” of Ehn et al. [11].

But contemporary Participatory Design addresses matters of scale that are hard to work out “in the small,” and sometimes must be “writ large” [2]. Participatory Design increasingly is being used to address sociological and structural problems, including new forms of marginalization, the rising power of global multinationals (such as Google and Facebook), as well as geopolitical crises, such as climate change, migration, and rising authoritarian governments. At the same time, technology is contributing to new opportunities at scale – the possibility, for example, of citizen science to crowdsource scientific data collection, analysis, and even learning. Design and activism continue their dance, forming new partnerships, collaborations, and moments of “being alongside” [17]. Finally, the sites of IT intervention have grown from single user or small team systems to entire cities (“smart cities”), regions (sub-Saharan Africa), to global infrastructures – as the vision of ubiquitous computing, once a subdomain of Human-Computer Interaction, gradually takes over and becomes Human-Computer Interaction [1].

All of this reveals a central challenge to Participatory Design as we move forward. Participatory Design pursues three objectives, each of which is challenging in its own right: design, political activism, and research. Its equal commitments to intervention and to knowledge-production, and its view that both knowledge and intervention are inextricably political, characterize Participatory Design and also draw so many of us in the design research community towards it, like moths to a flame. How to pursue all three of these, in ways that matter and at scales that reflect the needs of our era – this is the challenge manifested in papers, debates, annual meetings, and design projects throughout the Participatory Design community. The challenge influences both the ways that Participatory Design unfolds as design, and also how it unfolds as research. If Participatory Design is to intertwine design, politics, and knowledge-production, then perhaps our standard ways of reviewing – that is, the ways by which the community recognizes work as research, and as good research – will require intervention.

Here, the difficulty of non-Western research to be accepted in journals such as ToCHI becomes instructive. It prompts us to ask: Why did qualified Participatory Design reviewers struggle to recognize many non-Western submissions as good research? There are many possibilities: the submissions were not good research; the reviewers were not good reviewers; Western biases are baked into

peer reviewing; scientific biases (e.g., against the political) are baked into peer reviewing; and so forth. While we firmly stand behind our reviewers for this special issue, and while we also acknowledge that biases were inevitably a factor, we do wonder if the underlying issue has something to do with known tensions between design (as intervention) and science (as unbiased knowledge); between activism and science (a challenge often raised in the context of action research – e.g., [16]); and finally in the depoliticization of some forms of design, notably including many in HCI. Perhaps these complex relations differ in different geographic contexts – and if so, perhaps they render aspects of design and/or research rigor hard to perceive or appreciate for those outside of those contexts. As editors, we proposed and (mostly) stuck to our timelines, but towards the end there were a few papers that just weren't quite ready, though we are confident with more time they would have been. So one simple suggestion is that our community's self-imposed reviewing timelines do not allow us to work through intellectual challenges that are important to the community as a matter of peer reviewing.

A more substantive agenda might be to reframe our efforts to define Participatory Design away from a “classic” past, or from a list of “essential” values (democracy, participation, etc.) that defined Participatory Design at its origins. Instead, we might “gather together” Participatory Design in view of the present and near future *that we want*: a Participatory Design that is unabashedly interventionist, political, and knowledge-producing. Such a Participatory Design does not replicate Western structures of power in its storytelling and peer reviewing, but treats them as part of the condition it intervenes into. To invent, rather than reform our way to, such a Participatory Design would entail a number of research activities that we pursue together.

One is to develop new theories and methods in support of participatory design in an era where computing is powerfully under the control of multinationals such as Apple, Google, and Facebook, and government powers of surveillance, censorship, and control. Another is to develop participatory methods that can, somehow, scale. How does one work on democratization in the face of a corrupted or authoritarian state? And finally, as noted earlier, we presumably need more pluralistic conceptions of what counts as “research,” especially as design research – inside and outside of Participatory Design – attempts to address itself to more political matters. Such pluralism can be supported in part through the development of new rhetorics, that is, new discursive forms besides scientific reports as a mechanism of articulating design research.

4 Conclusion

In developing this special issue, we were always aware that the actual papers in the Issue would only cover a small subset of the issues that Participatory Design needs to address as it looks to the future. These full journal papers will, we hope, provide material that will engage our readership on the topic of Re-Imagining Participatory Design, and serve as a useful base on which to engage in a larger discussion on this topic within the Participatory Design and Human-Computer Interaction community more generally – encompassing many different voices, in a variety of fora. It is this idea of opening a set of conversations – both within the Participatory Design community as it currently exists, and among related research and action communities, which was, and remains, the goal for our Re-Imagining Participatory Design project. We view the future as an evolving set of directions, not a place.

Participatory Design has evolved over the years, as both the political, social and technological environments in which people do Participatory Design have changed. At the same time, new ideas and thinking are required to ensure that the body of work created in Participatory Design over the years are re-examined and re-interpreted for changing times. We do not see this occurring through any single piece of work or contribution, but rather as an ongoing, iterative process of dialogue involving multiple stakeholders and interests. This Special Issue will have served its purpose if it is seen as an opening, not a closing, in this ongoing debate on the topic of “*Re-Imagining Participatory Design*”. We look forward to listening to, and contributing to, this ongoing dialogue in the years ahead.

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