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We are not yet there!

in debate with Eevi Beck's 'P for Political'

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Abstract

This article argues that Participatory Design and what is outside known as 'Scandinavian Approach' to systems development implies a radical scientific and technology program: a change in the perception and implemetation of technology production and use. This implies not only to develop an understanding of the manifestation of power relations in and through ICT and software. It also requires new ways of developing and deploying technology. Without methods and processes that are applicable in non-academic contexts, the democratisation of technology remains an unfullfilled claim.

Keywords

Participatory Design, Software Engineering, Politics, Practice

Eevi Beck argues in her article 'P for Political – Participation is Not Enough' for re-focusing and restricting the Participatory Design (PD) discourse and the Scandinavian Approach to addressing power relations in technology production and use. (Beck 2003) 'Rather, concern with patterns of dominance – and therefore, power, marginality, and exclusion – at the intersection of computer systems development and use with societal-cultural and international power relations PD would be an appropriate focus.' (p. 88) While I agree with Beck on the importance of the discussion of patterns of dominance in relation to computer systems development to further PD in and out of Scandinavia, I do not share her low opinion about the methodology development addressing co-operation between users and developers of computer systems.

For me who got to know about Participatory Design as an alternative perspective on how software can be designed and developed, the heart of PD is the formulation of a utopia for the relation between development and use of computer systems. Understanding and implementing technology and its use as a product of mutual learning and co-operative design and development (Floyd et al. 1989) brings technology to the people. And it implies emancipation with respect to technology. This emancipation can be as radical – and incomplete – as the one following the introduction of printing technology and the alphabetization of society.

The following text first elaborates and discusses what I mean with PD's utopian relationship of technology production and use. General education did not abolish inequality – nor will PD. But the change in the patterns of domination might be worth the effort.

However, we are not yet there! I therefore outline what I see as still to do working towards that utopia. Developing a better understanding of the patterns of domination around the development and use of computer systems is an important part of it. But we also still need usable methods to develop useful systems together with the future users. I argue for keeping a wider scope for the PD community without loosing sight of where we are heading.

Utopian relationships

'Participatory Design is many things to many people (...) yet there is a remarkable core to the ideas which have been built on common ground (…) Computer applications need to be better suited to the actual skills and working places of the people using the systems (…) The barriers between technical specialists and people using computer applications need to be broken down in order to build effective communication during the design process' (Greenbaum 1993, p 27)

Joan Greenbaum summarises here what I regard as the most radical innovation of the Scandinavian Approach and PD: the re-conceptualisation of how design and use of technology should relate in order to develop usable and useful technology. Motivated by the perception of how software reifies and reinforces patterns of domination, the first Scandinavian projects in co-operation with the unions (Ehn 1993) started to change the relation between domain experts and software developers, between use and design. Use is brought to design when domain experts co-operate with software engineers around the design of software. Design is brought to use e.g. with the help of flexible and tailorable software. (Bødker 1999) Especially when computer systems are used as an infrastructure for co-operative work, use, interpretation, tailoring, design, development and maintenance activities are taking place in parallel and interlaced. (Dittrich et al. 2002)

What do I mean with utopian relationship of technology production and use? Technology production, especially in the industrial economy, is normally organised as separated from the use context. This means that the usage has to adapt to what was decided during design. Technology is something to adapt to, not something that can be adapted by the user to different circumstances. Software allows for a different relation to technology. The behaviour of a computer system is steered by descriptions. By changing these descriptions the behaviour can be changed as well. This allows changing a computer system after it is taken into use.

Participatory Design aims at including the future users in the design of computer systems

in order to change the design of future software to the better. However, it also changes the attitude of the domain experts towards technology. Technology – at least computer technology – becomes something that can be designed and adapted. The attitude of users towards technology changes from one of passive adaptation to the technology or cumbersome work-arounds to self secure design and change. During our field-studies in a one-stop shop, we researchers implied to the head of the one-stop shop, that we would like to talk to some of the technicians and systems designers. '*The designers? That's us!*' was her immediate reply. (Dittrich et al., 2002)

This emancipation with respect to technology opens up and requires a different concept for design. In her article 'Working relationships of technology production and use' (Suchman 1994) Lucy Suchman starts with developing such a different conceptualisation of design. Instead of the traditional 'design from nowhere' she argues for design as 'artful integration'. 'For technology designers the basic change implied by rethinking objectivity is from a view of systems development as the creation of discrete devices, or even networks of devices, to a view of systems development as entry into the networks of working relations – including both contests and alliances – that make technical systems possible.' (Suchman 1994, p.22)

This different relationship of technology production and use, the different conceptualisation of design, development and use of computer applications requires different process models, different methodologies and sometimes even different techniques. The PD discourse provides a forum to publish and discuss these kinds of processes, methods and techniques. The publications focussing on methods and techniques to allow more user participation are often not taking a political stance explicitly. Nonetheless, they are contributing to implementing the utopian relationship of use and development of computer systems.

User Participation is not enough

Many PD methods have been developed and applied in projects in co-operation between user organisations and university researchers. The implementation and dissemination of the PD methods and ideas will change both the context of PD and the methods. The following questions describe issues that I perceive as relevant, based on own research. They go beyond the upfront question of how to co-operate with users around the design of computer systems and address issues from software engineering and software architecture. Of course this list is not complete. Others may add on to it.

- How can the methods developed in academic contexts be adapted to industrial software engineering?
- What does 'PD in the wild' (Dittrich et al. 2002) look like and how can such developments be taken up and furthered by the PD community?
- How can software be designed to allow for tailoring and further development by and with the users?
- How does Participatory Design relate to other quality criteria besides usability and usefulness?
- How does Participatory Design change in an industrial context?
- How can the intertwine of use, interpretation, tailoring, maintenance and (further) development be supported to accommodate the need for continuous development?
- How can software development processes be organised in more flexible ways in order to integrate feed back from users even late in the process.

Many publications of the PD discourse and the Scandinavian IS community address these issues. However, especially regarding the adaptation and development of methods and processes to support co-operation between users and developers in non-academic contexts, there is still a lot to be done.

Keeping a wider scope

One of the prominent places to discuss the above listed questions is the PD discourse and the Scandinavian IS community. To ban contributions addressing such questions means dividing the criticism of technology from the implementation of an alternative approach.

I agree with Eevi Beck, that the 'political dimension of PD, the patterns of dominance (…) at the intersection of computer systems development and use with societal-cultural and international power relations,' is an important and often neglected issue for the PD community. However, even contributions that do not explicitly refer to a political motivation might contribute to change the relation of design and development of computer systems and therefore to change exactly the criticised pattern of dominance.

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